

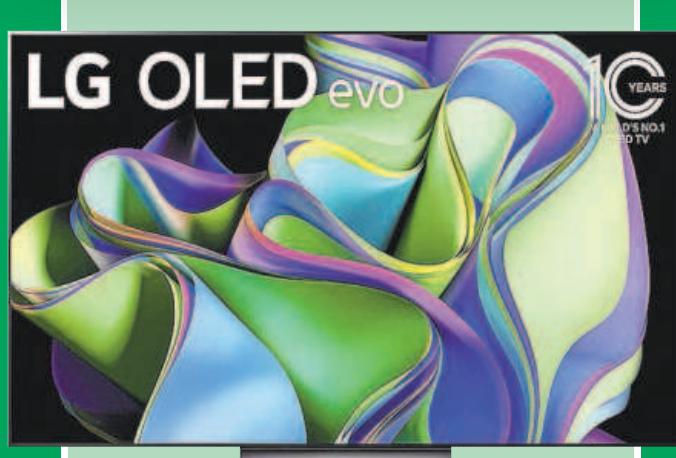


USA TODAY SPECIAL SECTION



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Don't buy sparkling water — make it. The 16-ounce Aer water bottle from Aerflo uses finger-size capsules filled with beverage-grade CO₂ to carbonate your beverages. Bonus: Capsule recycling is taken care of. See Pages 28-29. AERFLO

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TECH SHOPPERS NO LONGER WAIT FOR BLACK FRIDAY

**Consumers, retailers adjust patterns
as the deals start landing earlier**

GETTY IMAGES

Marc Saltzman Special to USA TODAY

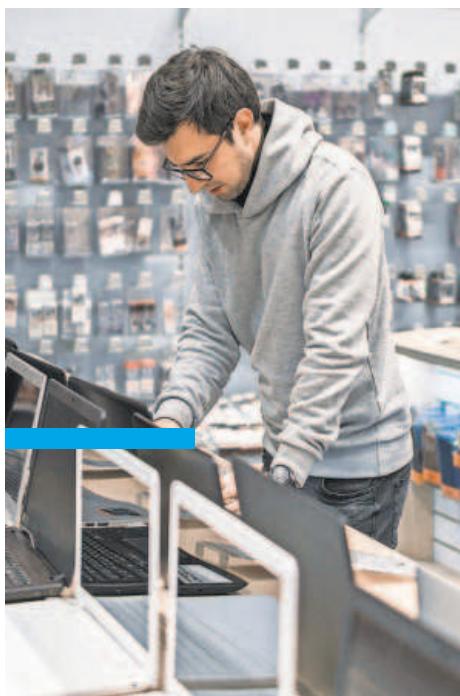
After waiting three years to buy a big-screen television, Lynda Newman says prices have finally dropped enough for her to afford one.

"We've had our eye on a 75-inch TV, and so that'll be our Black Friday purchase for the family," says the mom of three in Cleveland. "Actually, football season has started, and so we may get it before then, since we've seen them below \$500."

Like millions of other shoppers, Newman says she's looking for "deep discounts" this year, as she's trying "to do more with less money." That includes buying holiday gifts early for relatives, friends and colleagues when the price is right. This is in line with what many retailers expect for 2024.

"This year, nearly 50% of consumers will start their holiday shopping early, as people remain price-conscious and plan ahead to maximize their holiday budgets."

Brock McKeel, Walmart's vice president of consumer electronics



Big-screen TVs fill shelves at a Costco Wholesale store in North Port, Florida. Prices for TVs continue to fall even as screens continue to get larger. And with newer models arriving in stores, look for discounts on current versions.

MIKE LANG/SARASOTA HERALD-TRIBUNE

Shoppers are looking for deals earlier now that Black Friday has been, in the words of one expert, "diluted."

GETTY IMAGES

"This year, nearly 50% of consumers will start their holiday shopping early, as people remain price-conscious and plan ahead to maximize their holiday budgets," says Brock McKeel, vice president of consumer electronics for Walmart.

McKeel was referencing a Bankrate survey that found that 48% of holiday shoppers would begin shopping in August, September or October. It also found that 33% expected to spend less in 2024 than in 2023.

"To meet customers where and how they're shopping, Walmart will offer customers a 'holiday head start,' including its first Holiday Deals event of the season [which was held from Oct. 8-13] and the return of its inflation-free holiday meal — weeks earlier than previous years," McKeel says.

Walmart's retail locations and its online arm are expecting, and supporting, earlier shopping this year. "This is the case across electronics, home, fashion, toys and more," McKeel says. "Customers who want a jump-start on some of the best deals on top holiday gifts don't have to wait until November."

Online-only retailers such as Amazon also expected October to be a big month.

Amazon started its "Prime Day" promotion in 2015 to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the company and 10 years of its Amazon Prime service. Prime Day was initially held in July, but Amazon has added a second instance each October, presumably to get ahead of holiday shopping.

"We know saving money is a priority for our Prime members right now," says Carmen Nestares Pleguezuelo, vice president of North America marketing and prime tech at Amazon. "That's why Prime Big Deal Days is the perfect opportunity to start holiday shopping early, with millions of deals and some of our lowest prices of the year so far on items across holiday wish lists."

Is shopping earlier really better?

While consumers might spend less this year because of tighter budgets, retailers anticipate more autumn shopping for the winter holidays — and no doubt they would be happy to secure that revenue earlier than later. But experts are divided on whether there are really deals to be had.

"The holiday shopping season essentially kicks off in early October now with the Amazon Prime Big Deal Days event, during which other retailers also launch their competing sales," says Vitaly Pecharsky, head of deals operations at Slickdeals, a website, app and browser extension that lets shoppers vet and vote on deals from retailers. "By launching sales earlier in the season, retailers hope to capture consumer dollars early, and often."

Black Friday — the day after Thanksgiving and what was long considered the traditional start of the holiday shopping rush — has been "diluted," Pecharsky says, so it may pay to shop earlier. "Last year, less than 10% of the great deals we saw in the October sales were repeated for Black Friday."

"That said, depending on what you're shopping for, you can still find some amazing deals during Black Friday," Pecharsky adds. "We expect retailers will be pushing better deals this season than we saw during other sales events in 2024."

See something at a great price earlier in the season? Pecharsky advises jumping on the deal — but not before checking return policies to make sure you'll be able to take an item back after the holiday, if necessary.

Carolina Milanesi, president and principal analyst at Creative Strategies, a Silicon Valley-based market research firm, says shoppers need to do their research on what's really a good deal. "Big discount days like Prime Day, Black Friday and Cyber Monday have al-





ways captured consumers' attention, because who does not like a good bargain?" she says. "Even when you know [that] oftentimes the price is not that different than in a regular sale across the year."

"That said, over the years consumers have become more savvy in spotting a real deal," Milanesi adds. "Purse strings are tighter" this year, so "when it comes to tech, I would expect retailers to focus on highlighting tangible benefits of whatever gadget and focus on brands that are known for good customer service and quality."

TVs, games and AI seen as big movers

Walmart and Slickdeals expect large TVs to be a hit this year.

"One trend worth noting is in XL TVs, [as] screens are getting much larger and more affordable," McKeel says. "We're also seeing Quantum/QLED continuing to come down in consumer pricing."

Pecharsky predicted fall sales on OLED televisions, too: "There's lots of inventory of large OLED TVs, from 65 to 77 inches, and with new models rolling out in the new year, we expect to see some deeper discounting on the current versions."

On a related note, "rumors are flying about possible new video game console versions coming soon, which means we may finally see a discount on popular gaming consoles like PlayStation 5," he says.

McKeel says retailers are also keeping an eye on AI functionality in phones and other tech. "Several popular brands are significantly investing in this as the technology is scaling, and in turn we are working to bring it to customers at the best prices," he says.

Hot deals on lesser-known brands may also slot into buyers' budgets this year.

"Being a brand loyalist will cost you," Pecharsky says. "This shopping season, we expect to see great deals on electronics accessories, but you should judge them on the feature sets and price as opposed to the brand," he says. "It may even make the deal seem sweeter when you realize the great quality of these lesser-known-brand products."

Nestares Pleguezuelo echoes that sentiment. While shoppers can expect savings on electronics "from top brands like Beats, Samsung, and Fujifilm," they should also consider products from in-house brands like Amazon Basics and Amazon Essentials "that offer quality products at a great value."

Marc Saltzman is host of the Tech It Out podcast and the Tech Impact TV show, and the author of the upcoming book Apple Vision Pro For Dummies (Wiley)



NBA star Jimmy Butler, left, and Google Pixel product manager Kenny Sulaimon pose for a photo in August during a demonstration of "Add Me," the Pixel phone's AI-assisted image editing feature. JOSH EDELSON AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

Top online shopping tips

Stay safe: Stick with reputable retailers. Always look for "https" (as opposed to just "http") in the URL of a website, or a "padlock" icon in your browser, to ensure that you're on an encrypted connection. And use a payment method that offers buyer protections in case of a dispute or an unauthorized charge, such as a credit card.

Fortunately, there's a terrific new take on digital identity emerging that can confirm that 'you are you' with a quick face or fingerprint scan, and enable a payment, replacing the need for passwords, entering your card info, or one-time codes," says Mark Nelsen, head of consumer products at Visa. He's referring to passkeys. "Visa has developed one specifically for payments, and everyone should get familiar with them."

Sign up for deal alerts: Along with leveraging free platforms such as Slickdeals, Flipp and PayPal Honey to sniff out bargains, sign up for "deal alerts" on these and other sites and apps. You'll be notified when an item you have your eye on goes on sale.

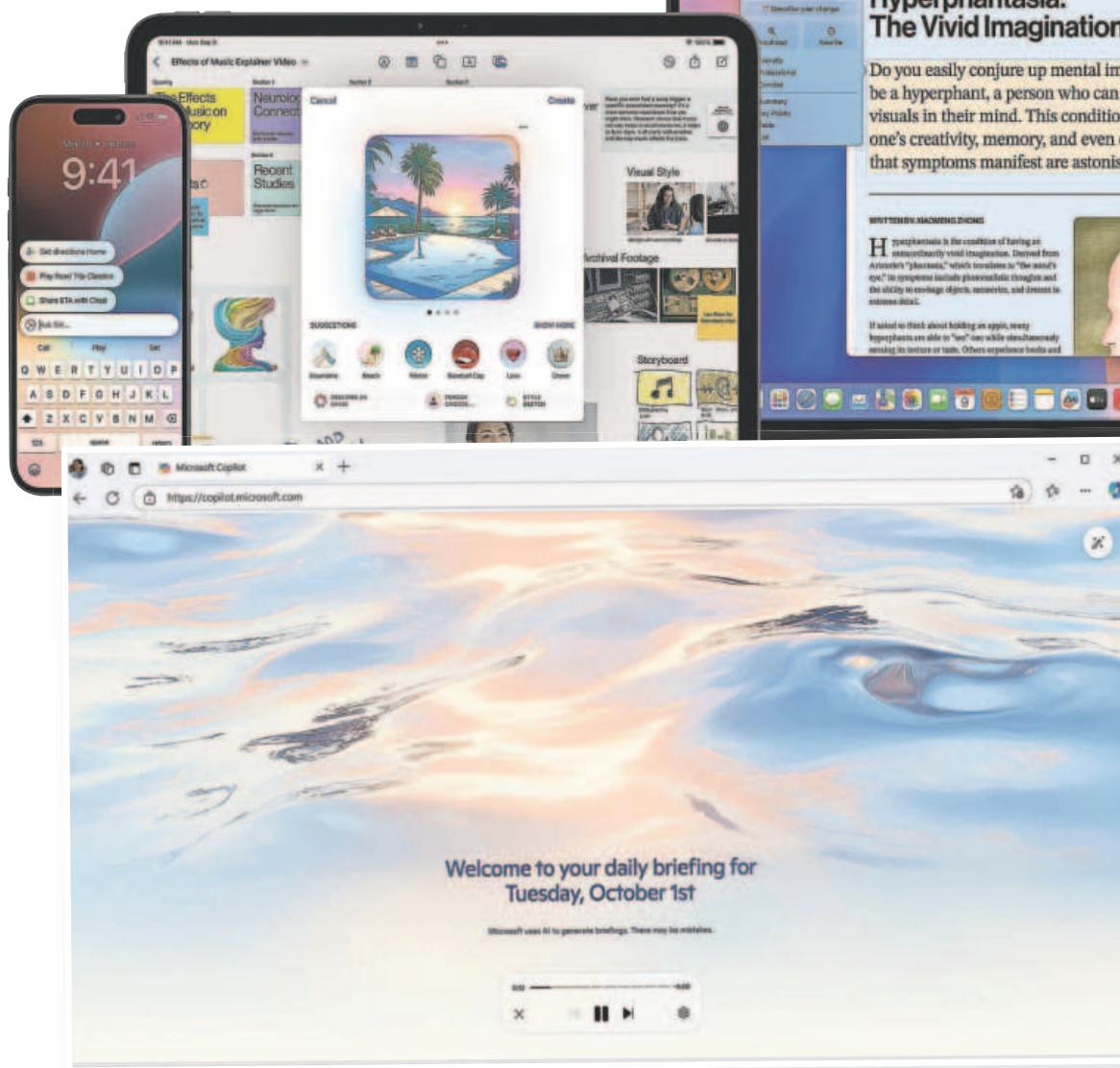
Amazon has a similar service called Amazon Wish List, says Carmen Nestares Pleguezuelo, an executive at the online retail giant. "As an insider tip, add items to your Amazon Wish List ahead of Prime Big Deal Days, and you'll get alerts if those products go on sale."

Leverage artificial intelligence: Visa suggests checking in with AI chatbots for gift ideas: "Retailers are beginning to incorporate AI assistants to help personalize your shopping."

New this year, customers can use Rufus, Amazon's generative-AI-powered assistant, to make better-informed shopping decisions, Nestares Pleguezuelo says. "As they are considering which tech gadget they might like to shop from Amazon, Rufus can help answer product-related questions and surface product recommendations based on the customer's interests."

WANT AI IN YOUR DEVICE? IT'S ON THE WAY

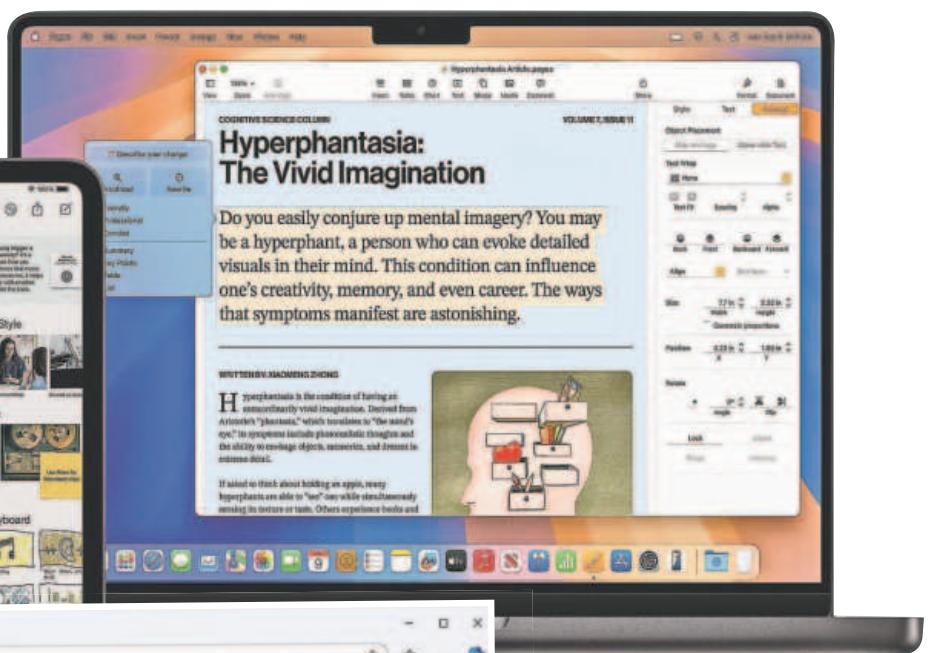
Marc Saltzman Special to USA TODAY



Millions of Americans have unlocked the capabilities of “generative AI” over the past two years — beginning with OpenAI’s ChatGPT and followed by Google Gemini (formerly Bard), Microsoft’s CoPilot, Meta AI and several others.

“Gen AI” tools have given consumers, students, employees and others a new way to create text, images and other content — from building a custom itinerary for a trip to Europe to helping draft business plans for entrepreneurs to creating pictures for a website or school or work presentation.

»»»



▲ Within the Apple ecosystem, AI stands for “Apple Intelligence,” and its features have begun rolling out. APPLE

◀ Microsoft incorporates its Copilot AI into its Edge browser. MICROSOFT



AI platforms are often free to use for day-to-day tasks. But for highly customized results or more advanced media creation, such as AI-generated videos on demand, many services require a paid subscription.

Whether it's via a website or app, gen AI to date has been mostly an online "cloud" application, which requires an internet connection.

But as you're shopping for gadgets this fall and winter, perhaps as holiday gifts for the family, you'll no doubt notice hardware-based AI as a key selling point for many digital devices.

In other words, AI is becoming baked into the tech itself.

For example, new laptops are billed as "AI PCs" with "CoPilot+" built into the Windows operating system. Apple is readying its "Apple Intelligence" for iPhone 15 and 16 running iOS 18. Samsung is promoting Galaxy AI across mobile devices. There's even Samsung's Bespoke AI-enabled appliances, such as refrigerators and laundry machines.

Why build AI into hardware?

"Many people have become fascinated by AI, as they've found ways to make their lives and jobs more efficient," says Dan Ackerman, editor in chief of Micro Center News, a recently formed news division of the popular computer and electronics retailer founded in 1979.

"There are several benefits to local AI over cloud AI, beginning with better privacy and security," Ackerman says. "For example, you may not want everything uploaded to the cloud, like information tied to your taxes or a proprietary company document, which you don't want to share publicly."

"Cloud-based gen AI has its place, sure, but the future is looking like a hybrid model," Ackerman says. "I think local AI is really where the focus will be for so much of what we're doing — for privacy, speed, cost, and efficiency reasons — and so pretty much any new laptop or desktop going forward will have not just a CPU and GPU [for graphics performance], but an NPU, a neural processing unit, that's capable of handling AI and running these large language models and image creation locally."

Not all tech experts are sold on the value proposition of AI on devices.

"Consumers are really not certain about what AI will bring as far as a return on investment," says Carolina Mila-



nesi, president and principal analyst at Creative Strategies, a Silicon Valley-based market research firm.

To Milanesi's point, a device with AI tends to cost more than one without. For example, a Dell XPS 13 with a new Intel Core Ultra Series 2 processor (256V Series), powered by AI, costs \$1,399 to start, compared with \$1,099 to start for a Dell XPS 13 laptop with the first-generation Intel Core Ultra Series processor (both with comparable specs).

"For certain products like smartphones, anything around camera or as intuitive as 'Circle to Search' might be the best elevator pitch for AI, but consumers will not be walking into a store to buy AI," Milanesi believes, "though they will appreciate it when all other requirements are met."

Search images in any app

Available on select Android smartphones, like the Google Pixel and Samsung Galaxy devices, Google's "Circle to Search" function referenced by Milanesi lets users press and hold the home button, and then use a finger (or stylus pen) to draw around anything on the screen, such as a landmark in a social media

post or a performer on a streaming show. The phone then performs an online image search for that object.

The feature works on top of other apps, so you don't need to leave any app to run a search. Search results are shown on the bottom half of the screen (then you can save, share and more). You can use Circle to Search in your personal surroundings, too. Say you like the shoes worn by someone in front of you in line at the supermarket. Point your camera at the footwear (no need to even snap a picture) and circle the item to look up the brand, price and more. Circle to Search also works on text.

Meanwhile, Samsung Galaxy phones have an integrated "Generative Edit" feature, which uses AI to analyze any photo and make suggestions on how to enhance it, such as by removing a shadow across someone's face, straightening a crooked photo or deleting Billy giving Grandma the "rabbit ears." You can have fun, too, such as isolating a skateboarder who is 6 inches in the air and repositioning him to make it look like he's 8 feet above ground — or even upside down. (When the AI amplifies an image, a watermark appears in the lower left of the image to show it was enhanced; the metadata tells this, too.)

Drew Blackard, vice president of mobile product management for Samsung Electronics America, tells USA TODAY, "Since the launch of Galaxy S24 earlier this year, 75% of our users have actively engaged with our AI features. Recently, we saw 18 million instances of our Galaxy AI features being used by S24 series users in just one week — and that's only within the U.S."

"That kind of data tells us consumers clearly want this," Blackard says.

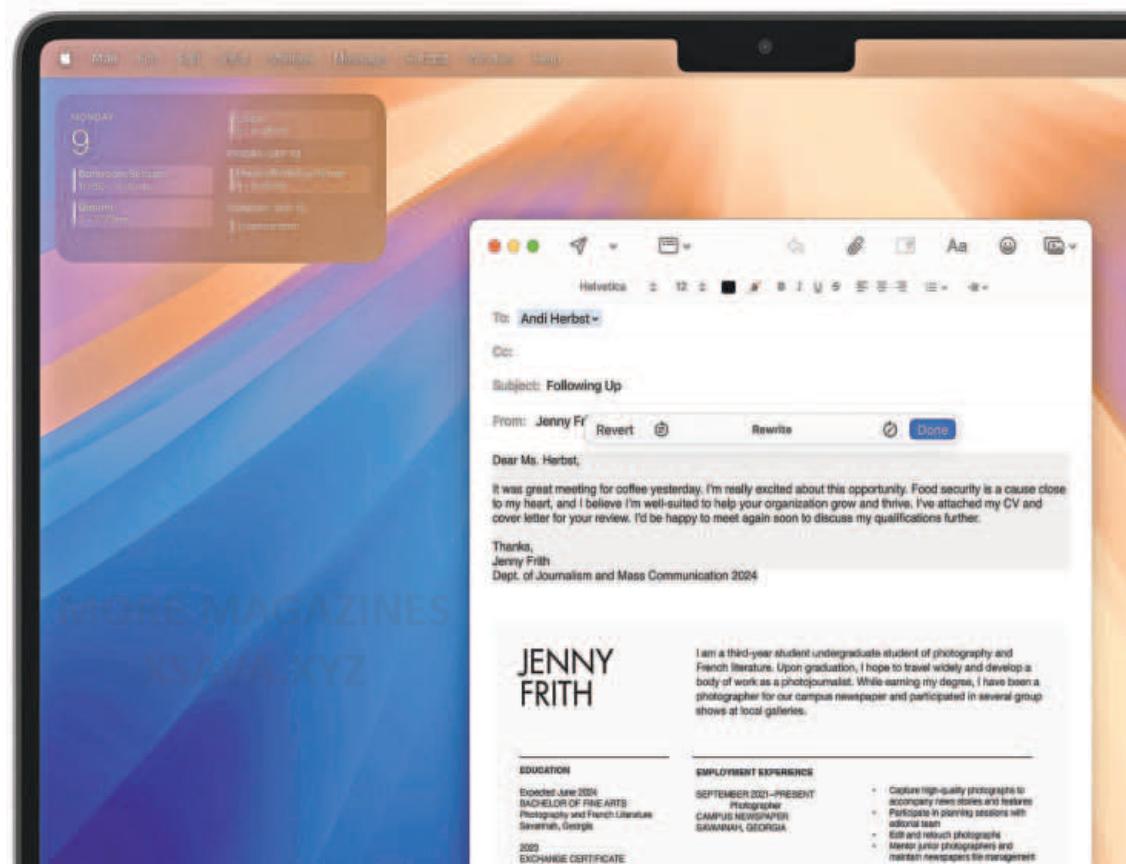
In partnership with Google Gemini, Samsung's Galaxy AI also lets you live transcribe a call with someone who speaks another language or summarize a conversation with bulleted highlights. And "Chat Assist" includes enhanced messaging features such as suggested replies and proofreading.

What do consumers say, though?

HP is one of the many computer manufacturers embracing AI PCs, bundled with a CPU, GPU and NPU.

"Once customers understand what's possible with AI on device, it's a no-brainer," says Sam Chang, senior vice president and division president of consumer PC solutions at HP.

"You're getting cost savings since you



The Apple Intelligence suite includes Writing Tools, which offers assistance with tasks like writing, proofreading and summarizing text. Writing Tools works “virtually everywhere you write,” Apple says. APPLE

I want to make a t-shirt as a gift for my brother. He loves taking his wiener dog for pup cups, can you turn that into a design.

How fun! Your brother will be sure to love it. Here's a design, what do you think? 😊

don't need to pay for a subscription, it's more secure and private [than the cloud], and you get a faster response by running the model locally," Chang said in an interview in late September at HP Imagine, the company's annual event in

An image generated by Microsoft Copilot based on a prompt from a user. MICROSOFT

Palo Alto, California.

According to semiconductor giant Intel, AI PCs are the fastest growing segment of the PC industry, with Intel the leading provider in this segment. More than 15 million devices with Intel AI processors have shipped since December 2023, and the company is on track for more than 40 million before the end of the year, the company says.

"Customers are very excited by AI PCs powered by Intel Core Ultra CPUs," says Chris Tobias, Intel's general manager of Americas Technology and its Global Platform ISV team lead. "But perhaps it's true the benefits of AI on a PC are not fully comprehended by consumers. This confusion can result in hesitancy to adopt a new PC," Tobias adds. "The perception that AI is 'scary' or 'unnecessary' stems from a lack of awareness about its potential benefits."

Tobias notes that people already use AI daily through voice assistants, photo enhancing tools and grammar checkers, without even realizing it.

"Once consumers see how AI on a PC can personalize their experience,

streamline workflows, and boost performance — particularly in a seamless, secure environment — they tend to be more open to adopting it.

"Unlike free, web-based AI tools, AI on a PC allows for local processing, which keeps data more secure, reduces latency, and improves performance," Tobias says.

AI PCs aren't just about language models or image creation. AI can also aid in extending battery life, allow smarter and faster video editing, and analyze your own content for a more tailored experience.

Sales of AI PCs are forecast by Gartner to grow 165% year over year into 2025 and account for 43% of PCs.

On Oct. 1, Windows announced new Copilot+ PC features, including:

- "Click to Do," which adds an interactive overlay on your screen, enabling suggested quick actions to appear over images or text.

- An improved Windows Search, which lets you (find files by describing them in your own words).

- "Super Resolution in Photos," which promises to enhance lower-resolution photos into high-quality images without looking blurry or pixelated.

Apple Intelligence on the way

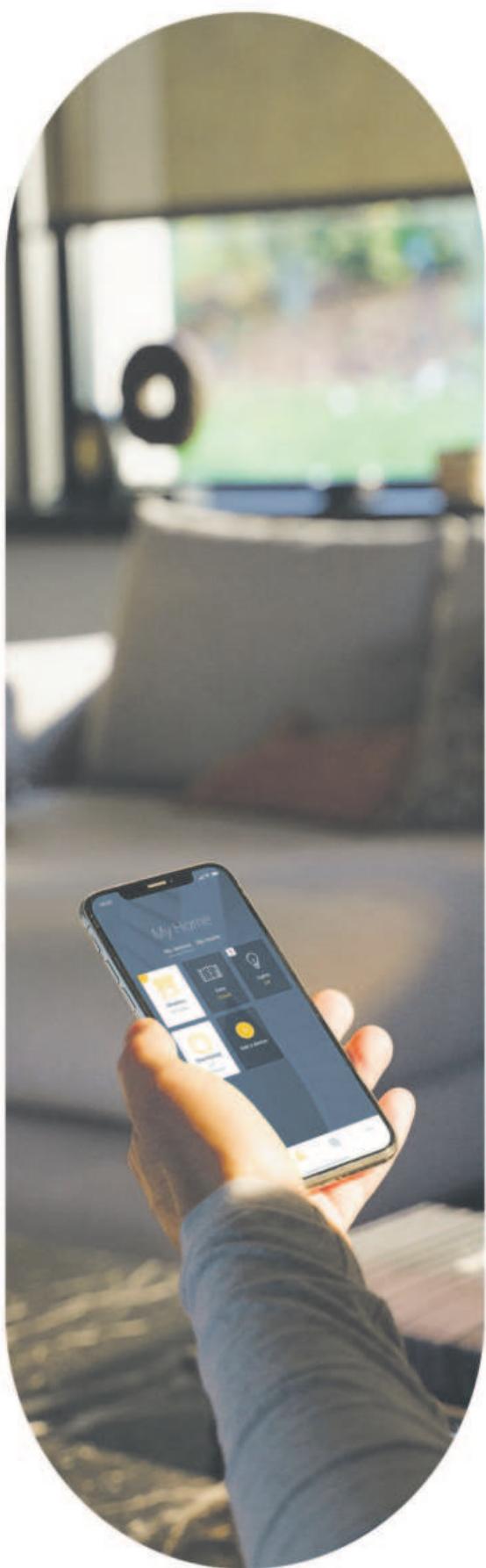
While not quite ready for the much-hyped iPhone 16 launch, AI — what Apple is stylizing as "Apple Intelligence" — was to be available in October. The company calls it a suite of tools and technologies to empower users to perform several tasks on an iPhone not previously available — while at the same time protecting their privacy.

You'll be able to ask the AI to help draft emails, iMessages and other text for you; to create images based on what you ask for as a prompt; and to record, transcribe and summarize audio. Other features include a smarter Siri that's more conversational and contextual.

Similar to Google Pixel and Samsung Galaxy owners, iPhone users will soon be able to remove unwanted subjects in photos.

Speaking of photography, by year's end Apple Intelligence will let iPhone users leverage the new touch- and pressure-sensitive Camera Control button along the right-hand side of the phone to analyze objects you point the camera lens at, such as identifying a dog breed.

But again, Apple Intelligence is more MIA than AI at this point — but it's around the corner. If consumers want it.





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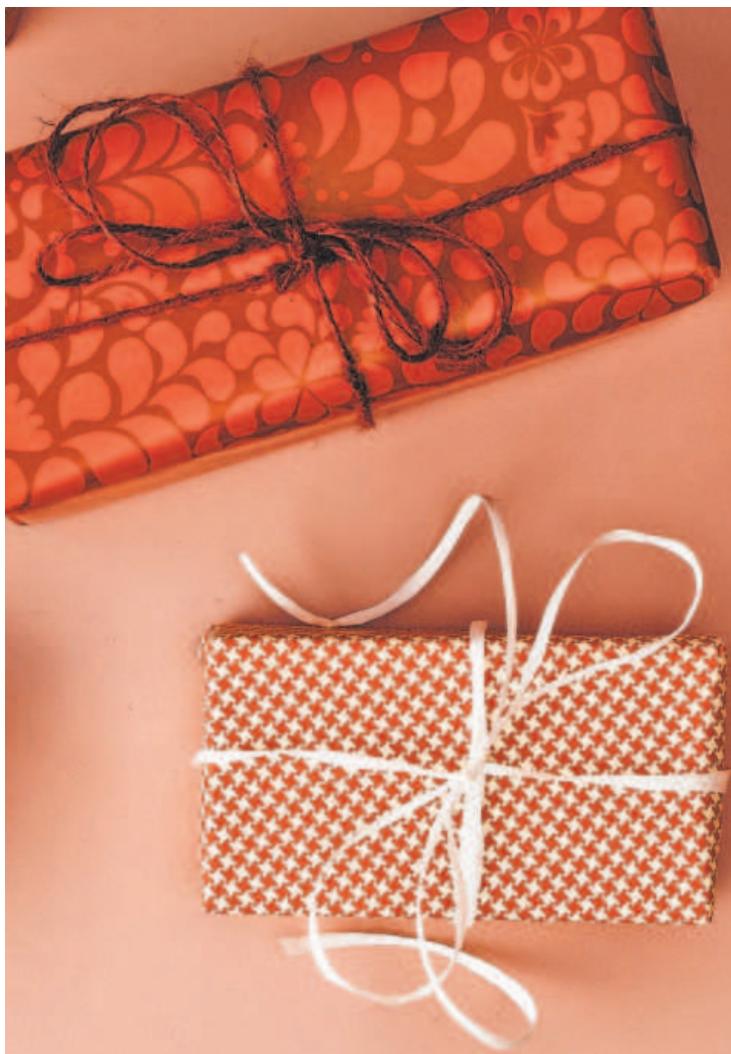
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ULTIMATE HOLIDAY GIFT LIST

We tapped into the specialty work of Reviewed.com to round up some of the year's best consumer electronics — just in time for holiday shopping. Here are some of their picks for guaranteed happy gift giving.



Televisions

While TV technology continues to evolve year after year, what you're looking for stays pretty much constant: deep, inky blacks; accurate, vibrant colors; and functionality that keeps frustration out of your leisure time. Now more than ever, it's possible to get an excellent television for decent money. For most people, we recommend a 55- or 65-inch display — big enough to deliver an immersive experience without dominating a living room.

Best overall pick: LG C4

Televisions in the LG C series have been at the top of our list for years, and for good reason. The OLED technology the C4 uses has perfect black levels, thanks to its pixel-by-pixel brightness control, and it's even brighter than previous models. Plus, its color out of the box is excellent, making it a terrific display for movie enthusiasts. (For the most accurate imagery, make sure to put it in Filmmaker or Cinema picture mode.) Add in solid gaming support with four HDMI 2.1 ports, Nvidia G-Sync and 144Hz refresh rate for gaming with a PC, and LG Game Optimizer for quick access to all gaming functions, and the LG C4 will please every family member. It's also available in a range of sizes from 42 to 83 inches.

Best bright-room TV: Sony Bravia 9

Sony recently unified its TV branding by placing the Bravia name front and center, with the Bravia 9 standing as the company's flagship TV. Like other TV manufacturers, Sony uses mini-LED technology to blast out high brightness from its light source, but it also leverages a Sony advancement in backlight technology that greatly





improves the dimming control. What does this mean for you? The Bravia 9 is capable of pumping out incredible brightness while keeping dark sections of the screen dark far better than most other TVs (save for OLEDs and their pixel-level control, mentioned above with LG model). Sony also has undoubtedly the best picture processing in the business and has for years.

The one drawback is that all of this performance costs a premium. The Bravia 9 is one of the more expensive TVs on the market, but when it comes down to it, it's also one of the absolute best.



2024 TCL-QM8 TV. REVIEWED

Best midrange TV: TCL QM8 (2024)

Remember how we said the Sony Bravia blasts out brightness? The TCL QM851G mini-LED TV is even brighter, but it doesn't match the Sony when it comes to blacks and fine backlight control. That isn't to say the QM8 is a slouch on those performance points. The TCL does a great job limiting blooming around bright images, and HDR content pops (thanks to that high brightness), although its SDR signal processing can be a bit lackluster. Even so, the TCL QM8 is an excellent TV, especially when you factor in that it's less than half the cost of the Bravia 9.

Best Budget TV: Hisense U6N

An exceptionally bright TV isn't necessary for all of us. Smaller rooms in particular can be overwhelmed by the light from a Bravia 9 or QM8, not to mention the smallest size for both is 65 inches. The Hisense U6N starts with a 55-inch version, with options available up to 85 inches. The U6N also uses mini-LED technology and achieves an excellent contrast ratio for the price, which hovers around \$500 for a 55-inch model.

John Higgins, Reviewed

Wearables

A good wearable — be it a smartwatch or fitness tracker — lets you put your phone away and still keep on top of your digital life and your workouts. Tracking your schedule, staying in touch with the people that matter, monitoring your health — you can get it all in a wearable.

Apple Watch Series 9

Apple released the Apple Watch 10 this fall, but for your money, the Apple Watch Series 9 is still the one to get. It offers many of the same features — including 2,000 nits of screen brightness, health-conscious apps for sleep tracking or EKG monitoring, and comparable water resistance and battery life — but since it's now a generation old, you'll be able to find it cheaper than the Series 10. And as with most Apple products, the year-over-year improvements are more incremental upgrades than innovations.



Apple Watch Series 9.
REVIEWED

advanced features if you're willing to pay for a Premium subscription, including more detailed sleep data and a Daily Readiness Score. Of course, that extra cost is the big sticking point. At \$80 per year, the tracker and Premium together cost \$240 for the first year — however, that's still cheaper than most advanced devices, like smartwatches. Ultimately, however, whether you get the subscription or not, the Fitbit Charge 6 is the best fitness tracker out there, and it comes at a reasonable price.



The Garmin Forerunner 165 has a customizable display, so you can see the metrics that matter to you and skip those that don't. GARMIN

Garmin Forerunner 165

Garmin makes some of the best running watches on the market, and the Forerunner 165 is a great entry-level to intermediate-level choice. In addition to tracking the usual steps, heart rate, sleep and recovery, Garmin gives you in-depth insights into how this data affects your fitness and even suggests workouts to help you improve. The display is also customizable, so you can focus on the information that's most important to you and skip what you don't care about seeing on your watch. Is there anything the Forerunner 165 can't do? It won't give you advanced running specs like your cadence, ground contact time, and stride length, but it has everything else you could want.



GETTY IMAGES

Laptops, Tablets, and Smartphones

The internet has been a mainstay of our lives for decades now, and the days of dealing with clunky PC towers are over. Even basic smartphones are powerful and versatile enough to handle most online tasks like email, messaging, social media posting and web browsing. • You could forgo traditional computers entirely and just use a tablet with a Bluetooth keyboard and stylus — many tablets and laptops share the same processing power, and more programs than ever are compatible with Windows, MacOS, iOS and Android. • We've tested hundreds of laptops, tablets and phones — here are the ones we'd buy.



The Acer Swift Go 14 packs in functionality at a budget price.
AUBREE BRABHAM
REVIEWED

Acer Swift Go 14

The 2024 Acer Swift Go 14 puts the essentials at center stage. Despite the sub-\$1,000 price tag, the Swift Go 14 crushes the competition in performance and has a tough metal chassis that can endure rough travels. Paired with its excellent keyboard, a 2K webcam, and a reasonable battery life, the Swift Go 14 makes a strong case against pricier options like the MacBook Air 13 or Dell XPS 13.

Apple iPad Air 13

The iPad Air 13 M2 is an incredibly capable device with many of the same features and performance of the last generation's iPad Pro. It's more powerful than most laptops, and its 13-inch display makes it easier than ever to ditch your laptop.

OnePlus Pad

The OnePlus Pad is an impressive Android tablet that nails the necessities. Its powerful processor and large memory are ideal for resource-hungry apps, and the tablet's design can hold its own against the iPad. We were disappointed, however, with its relatively paltry 128GB of storage, with no option to upgrade via Micro SD card.



Samsung Galaxy S24 Ultra

The Samsung Galaxy S24 Ultra has been out for months, and you can find a good sale price around the holidays. It packs one of the best smartphone camera arrays available, and its included stylus is a joy for note-taking and drawing. Compared to the iPhone 15 Pro, it has little to envy.

Samsung Galaxy S24 Ultra.
REVIEWED

Moto Stylus 5G

If you're on a budget and need a solid handset that'll help you stay in touch, stream video, take decent photos, and get online, check out the Moto G Stylus 5G for \$250. It's a mid-range Android handset that comes with a 50MP camera, a 6.6-inch high-resolution display, and 256GB of storage. It even comes with a stylus, like the far more expensive Samsung Galaxy Ultra.



Asus ROG Zephyrus G16

The 2024 Asus ROG Zephyrus G16 is just over a half-inch thick, but in that MacBook-esque footprint, it crams some of the most powerful hardware you can get in a laptop. The gorgeous OLED display and great battery life make it a joy to use for productivity, too — we'd take it over a MacBook Pro any day.

The 2024 ROG Zephyrus G16 is an all-around winner.
REVIEWED



Smart Home Tech

Navigating the world of smart tech with all its options can feel like a high-stakes game. To cut through the noise, we've tested the latest smart home devices, getting hands-on experience with everything from smart speakers to security cameras. Whether you're after a smart light that sets the perfect vibe, a smart speaker to control your connected devices or a video doorbell that alerts you to another package delivery, we've got you covered. These are our top picks — smart home devices that stood out in our tests and won us over.

Nest Doorbell (wired)

When it comes to video doorbells, the Nest Doorbell (wired) is our top pick for its impressive performance. It provides reliable 24/7 recording and accurate smart alerts without a subscription. During testing, it impressed us with its wide 145-degree view, capturing everything from package deliveries to visitors with crystal-clear detail. Unlike with some competitors, you get all these perks without extra subscription fees.

Aqara U200 Smart Lock

This may be the year you ditch the keys and try a smart lock. The Aqara U200 smart lock offers various ways to unlock the door, including Apple Home Key, fingerprint and password options. It has a Quiet Unlock Mode and an auto-lock feature for added convenience and security. It's a retrofit lock with a sleek keypad, so you can keep your current deadbolt, making it great for renters. While it might be a bit pricier and trickier to set up than some other locks, its Matter-over-Thread support, valuable features, battery life and good looks make it worth considering.

Amazon Echo Spot

The Amazon Echo Spot is a compact device that combines a smart speaker, alarm clock and touchscreen display. Designed to be the hub of your smart home, it lets you control your devices with simple voice commands. The Echo Spot features a clear, easy-to-read touchscreen and offers functionality similar to an Echo speaker's. It's ideal for placing on night-



The Amazon Echo Spot is more than a speaker.

AMAZON

stands, bookshelves or kitchen counters, or in home offices. It also includes a 1.73-inch full-range speaker with customizable sound settings, delivering impressive audio quality for its size.



The TP-Link Kasa Smart Plug supports the Matter smart-home protocol, boasts energy-management features — and won't get in the way of other plugs.

TP-LINK

TP-Link Kasa Smart Plug (KP125M)

The TP-Link Kasa Smart Plug (KP125M) is our top choice for an indoor smart plug, blending style with substance. The slim design ensures it doesn't block other outlets. It also supports Matter, a smart home protocol that allows you to use any smart home device with your preferred voice assistant or platform, making it compatible with various devices. We also love the unique energy monitoring features for tracking and managing your power usage in real time using the Kasa app.

Govee RGBIC Permanent Outdoor Lights

Smart lights are a versatile choice for any home, and the Govee RGBIC Permanent Outdoor Lights are one of our favorite smart home tech devices, offering a blend of durability and versatility. These outdoor smart lights are easy to install and offer 16 million colors and dozens of preprogrammed scene modes that make them perfect for year-round use, whether decking the halls (hint, hint!) or just setting the mood for a summer evening. The weather-resistant lights work with voice assistants like Alexa and Google Assistant or can be controlled remotely with an app, providing convenience and style. We love the durable design and extensive features, which make them a worthwhile investment for anyone looking to add some fun outside.

Rachel Murphy, Reviewed

Home Helpers

Buying a new large home appliance right now can feel like like buying a computer. The latest technology is both powerful and complex. Many of our favorite appliances feature technological advancements that truly make life easier. • There are auto-sensing dishwashers, laundry centers equipped with the power of AI and refrigerators with Wi-Fi connections that put endless recipes, video, music and more in the center of your kitchen. • After testing products from the biggest brands in the business, here are our favorite tech-forward home appliances of 2024.

Bosch 800 Series SHP78CM5N Dishwasher

The Bosch 800 Series dishwasher delivers high-tech cleaning performance and unparalleled customization, making it the best dishwasher we've tested.

From the PowerControl spray arm to Bosch's CrystalDry technology, this dishwasher will clean and dry your dishes better than most on the market — and it will do it all in near silence.

Plus, it's smart: Connecting to the Home Connect app enables even more powerful features, including remote start and cycle customizations. You can even choose to target specific areas for deeper cleaning, meaning there's no wrong way to load this dishwasher.

Samsung Bespoke Induction Range

We rejoice when style and substance come together to create an appliance that makes life easier *and* more beautiful.

In our testing, this new smart induction range from Samsung delivered lightning-speed water boiling, even baking results and excellent heat retention, plus it has a top-notch touchscreen control panel that's intuitive and fun to use.

The Samsung Bespoke Induction Range has a camera inside, so you can monitor what's cooking through the control panel or your smartphone. The control panel is also your access to the stovetop and oven controls, suggested recipes and local weather. It can even connect to other smart devices to answer calls or monitor your Ring doorbell.

Despite all these impressive features, this range also boasts a reasonable price, especially compared with other smart induction ranges on the market.





Samsung Bespoke 4-Door Flex Refrigerator with AI Family Hub

Some appliances really make you feel like you're in the future. Samsung's Bespoke 4-Door Flex Refrigerator with AI Family Hub is one of them.

This sleek fridge features a large touchscreen on the upper-right door and gives access to ultra-modern tech like AI Vision, which uses an internal camera to catalog groceries inside. A connection to the SmartThings app makes this grocery inventory available on your smartphone from anywhere.

The Wi-Fi-connected screen also features access to the SmartThings recipe catalog, music and TV streaming, and other apps. This refrigerator also includes some of the brand's well-loved features — like a temperature-adjustable quadrant, Beverage Center and customizable door panels.

GE Profile PFQ97HSPVDS Washer-dryer Combo

Get the best of both words with the GE PFQ97HSPVDS, the best combination washer-dryer we've tested. A Microban-coated drum keeps odor and mold away. It is also incredibly energy-efficient thanks to its heat pump technology that dries clothes in the same drum they're washed in.

Even better? Our tests show the GE PFQ97HSPVDS's wash cycle removes stains better than most washing machines on the market.

Samsung Bespoke WH46DBH500EVA3 Laundry Center

The Samsung Bespoke WH46DBH500EVA3 is a laundry center for consumers who want top-of-the-line washing performance with the space-saving footprint of a stacked combo.

In our testing, the WH46DBH500EVA3 was outstanding at removing stains, especially when using the AI OptiWash cycle that automatically adjusts the wash to account for soil level and fabric type.

A dual-tank automatic detergent dispenser means you can switch between different types of detergent with ease, and the useful app features make getting your clothes clean a breeze. All in all, this is a machine that makes wash day as effortless as it gets.

Danielle DeSiato and Jennifer Ernst Beaudry, Reviewed



"Star Wars Outlaws" lets players explore the seedier sides of that galaxy far, far away. UBISOFT

Video Games

The weather is turning cold, the days are getting short and a constant stream of high-profile releases means there's never been a better time to catch up on your gaming backlog.

'Elden Ring: Shadow of the Erdtree'

Windows, PlayStation 5, PlayStation 4, Xbox Series X and S, Xbox One

It's time to return to the Lands Between in the expansion to 2022's "Elden Ring." The price might seem steep at \$40, but the sheer size of the new map to explore (expect 25 to 40 hours of content) makes it well worth it, not to mention the slew of new bosses, items and weapons, plus the storyline.

Just be warned that this is the real end game. Even "Elden Ring" vets will likely struggle as the new Realm of Shadow has its own collectibles-based leveling system that renders even overpowered characters vulnerable at first.

'Star Wars Outlaws'

Windows, PlayStation 5, Xbox Series X and S

If you've wanted to explore the shadier reaches of the "Star Wars" universe, then "Outlaws" is the game for you. Instead of a Jedi, you play as the smuggler Kay Vess during the time of the original trilogy. Armed with a blaster and a speeder bike, Vess has to survive the murky waters of the franchise's classic criminal cartels.

'Dragon Age: The Veilguard'

Windows, PlayStation 5, Xbox Series X and S

Ten years after the release of "Inquisition," the next installment of Bioware's "Dragon Age" franchise is here. Despite a heavier focus on real-time action and a more cartoonish art style than its predecessors, "Veilguard" is still a "Dragon Age" game through and through. In this direct sequel to "Inquisition," players have to chase down former companion Silos as he attempts to tear down the barri-

ers between the world of Thedas and the dream realm of the Fade.

'Final Fantasy XVI'

Windows, PlayStation 5

"Final Fantasy XVI" isn't a new release, but for gamers who don't own a PS5, the latest in Square Enix's mainline "Final Fantasy" series is finally available on PC and for streaming through Nvidia's GeForce Now service.

With a heavier focus on action and combos compared with past turn-based "Final Fantasy" games, and a darker, more politically minded storyline — think more "Game of Thrones" than chocobos and moogles, though the latter are still present — FF16 is an ambitious attempt to redefine the series. Don't worry about getting overwhelmed by details, either, as the comprehensive Active Time Lore system can pull up relevant information about characters during conversations, in cut scenes and at other times it would be relevant to the story.

'Dead Rising Deluxe Remaster'

Windows, PlayStation 5, Xbox Series X and S

"Dead Rising" is back. Eighteen years after the game's original release in 2006, the remaster not only updates the zombie horror survival game to 4K but improves everything that hampered the original (including better AI and pathfinding for companions). Take on the role of war photographer Frank West as he attempts to survive for three days in a zombie-infested mall, rescuing fellow survivors, messing around with store merch and attempting to unravel a wide-ranging conspiracy. Expect to die, a lot, but each attempt will get you farther than the last.

Jonathan Hilburg, Reviewed



THE BEST TELEVISIONS

Standards improve and features change over time, but the basics of a good television set remain the same. You want inky black levels, brilliant colors, excellent processing and a fast, intuitive smart interface. Reviewed has spent years testing hundreds of the most popular TVs, so we know how to shop for one. • All things considered, the best TV for most people is the **LG C3**. This OLED television features stunning contrast, 4K resolution, Dolby Vision support and LG's webOS smart platform. Its cutting-edge gaming features make it a great pick for gamers, as well. But if you don't want to shell out this kind of cash, don't worry: We've got great TV picks for every budget.

Best overall LG C3

- **Screen sizes:** 42", 48", 55", 65", 77", 83".
- **HDR support:** Dolby Vision, HDR10, HLG.
- **Smart platform:** LG webOS 23.

With its incredible picture quality and extensive selection of A/V- and gaming-related features, the LG C3 OLED is our pick for the all-around best TV you can buy. Like its predecessor, the C3 pairs picture-perfect black levels with punchy highlights and rich, voluminous color. It's brighter than the C2, but only by a hair, due to new picture processing enhancements that manage light output.

This TV is at its best when displaying HDR content, covering an impressive 99% of the HDR color gamut (DCI-P3) and doling out highlights as bright as 800 nits. Picture purists will appreciate the C3's out-of-the-box accuracy and Dolby Vision support, and everyone in the room will appreciate its remarkably wide viewing angles (a hallmark of OLED displays).

Few TVs offer as many gaming-related features as the LG C3, including ultra-low input lag, four HDMI 2.1 inputs that support 4K/120Hz gaming, Variable Refresh Rate (VRR) and Auto Low Latency Mode (ALLM). The C3 also supports AMD FreeSync Premium Pro and Nvidia G-Sync compatibility. LG's Game Optimizer is back, too, which gives gamers an easy-to-access menu for adjusting the TV's picture and toggling its gaming-related enhancements on the fly.

Pros: Incredible contrast; vivid, accurate color; all the gaming features you'll need.

Cons: So-so smart platform; not as bright as competitive OLEDs.

This **LG C3** is the best TV we've ever tested. **LG**

Best upgrade Sony A95L

- **Screen sizes:** 55", 65", 77".
- **HDR support:** Dolby Vision, HDR10, HLG.
- **Smart platform:** Google TV.

The Sony A95L is the follow-up to the A95K, a TV we had previously declared the best we'd ever seen. The A95L is even better than its predecessor. From a picture-quality standpoint, it's the best TV money can buy.

The A95L represents the best that QD-OLED technology has to offer. Its color volume is unparalleled, its specular highlights are among the brightest in its class, and Sony's picture processing is second to none. Simply put, everything looks good on the A95L — from cable broadcasts to 4K movies mastered in Dolby Vision.

And if it's features you're after, the A95L is practically overflowing with them. There are more audio- and video-related enhancements than any TV we can remember, including IMAX Enhanced mode, Surface Acoustic Audio, and Bravia Cam support. Gamers are covered, too, as the A95L supports Variable Refresh Rate (VRR), Auto Low Latency Mode (ALLM) and Sony's Game Mode.

Unfortunately, gamers who own two current-gen gaming consoles and an eARC-enabled soundbar will have to juggle their devices across just two HDMI 2.1 inputs. This is the only aspect in which the A95L's capabilities fall short of those of its top-tier OLED competitors like the Samsung S95C and the LG G3.

It doesn't come cheap, but the Sony A95L is the ultimate TV for those looking for the absolute best picture on the market.

Pros: World-class contrast and color; excellent software and features; sleek, accommodating design.

Cons: Fewer gaming features than competitors.

Best value Hisense U8K

- **Screen sizes:** 55", 65", 75", 85".
- **HDR support:** Dolby Vision, HDR10, HDR10+, HLG.
- **Smart platform:** Google TV.

If you're shopping for a high-performance TV without a high-end price, the Hisense U8K should be at the top of your list. Its feature set and picture quality rival some of the best LED TVs from competitive brands, but at a much lower price.

Like many top-shelf TVs, the U8K blends mini-LEDs and quantum dots for a bright, colorful picture. Its high amount of dimming zones and excellent local dimming software keep its black levels inky while minimizing light bloom. If you have a brighter-than-average living space, the U8K is a slam-dunk; it's one of the brightest TVs of the year, and its average picture brightness is plenty sufficient to cut through sunlight.

The built-in Google smart platform is easy enough to use and offers plenty of downloadable apps. It's not quite as powerful a gaming machine as other high-end TVs, but there's enough here to satisfy casual and dedicated gamers alike. It's equipped with two HDMI 2.1 inputs that support 4K/120Hz gaming (or up to 144Hz with VRR), as well as Auto Low Latency Mode (ALLM) and AMD FreeSync Premium Pro.

Its picture processing isn't as sharp as some of the other TVs in its class, and like all mini-LED TVs, the picture quality gets noticeably worse during off-axis viewing. Nevertheless, with 55-inch models starting at \$750 and 65-inch models frequently on sale for about \$1,000, the U8K is positively overflowing with value.

Pros: Incredibly bright and colorful; superb local dimming; long list of gaming features.

Cons: Only two HDMI 2.1 inputs; quirky picture processing; narrow viewing angle for most sizes.



The Hisense U6K takes the title as best TV under \$500. The U6K owes most of its success to its mini-LED display. This technology is typically reserved for pricier TVs, but the U6K features a scaled-down version. MICHAEL DESJARDIN/REVIEWED

Best for under \$500 Hisense U6K

- **Screen sizes:** 55", 65", 75", 85".
- **HDR support:** Dolby Vision, HDR10, HDR10+, HLG.
- **Smart platform:** Google TV.

The Hisense U6K is the most affordable mini-LED TV on the market, making it a great choice for those shopping for a budget-friendly TV with a hefty amount of performance-related upside. Its picture quality is better than most TVs in its price range, and although it's not packed to the brim with features, its flexible smart platform and handful of gaming features should be enough to satisfy most bargain-hunters.

The U6K owes most of its success to its mini-LED display. This hardware is typically reserved for pricier TVs, but the U6K features a scaled-down version of the technology with fewer dimming zones, keeping it firmly locked into a budget-friendly price bracket. With mini-LEDs in tow, the U6K offers tighter dimming zone control than entry-level and midrange TVs that rely on traditional LEDs.

It's bright enough for casual daytime viewing and looks good in the dark, too.

With quantum dots in play, the U6K is also quite colorful for a midrange TV; it covers an impressive 96% of the HDR color gamut (DCI-P3). It's not as gaming-friendly as pricier TVs from Hisense and competitive brands, but Auto Low Latency Mode (ALLM) and Variable Refresh Rate (VRR) are included.

There are a few drawbacks to the U6K's otherwise excellent approach: Its design isn't as sturdy or sleek as we'd like, and there are some picture processing issues that spoil some of the fun. Like many other Hisense TVs, the U6K often exhibits a subtle, red-tinted ghosting effect on objects in motion, particularly during dimly lit scenes in warm lighting. It also struggles to upscale sub-4K content as cleanly as other midrange TVs.

Even so, if you're looking for an affordable TV that delivers better performance than most in its class, the U6K is a great pick.

Pros: Offers mini-LEDs for less; bright enough for daytime viewing; excellent quantum-dot color.

Cons: Motion-related color fringing; narrow viewing angle; lackluster design.

Best for bright rooms

Samsung QN90C

- **Screen sizes:** 43", 50", 55", 65", 75", 85".
- **HDR support:** HDR10, HDR10+, HLG.
- **Smart platform:** Tizen OS.

As we've come to expect from TVs in Samsung's Neo QLED line, the QN90C is sensationally bright and colorful. It's one of the brightest TVs of the year, making it a great choice for folks with sun-soaked living spaces. The QN90C's sheer brightness and quantum dot-enhanced display make for an impressively punchy palette of colors, regardless of what you're watching.

Most impressive, however, is the local dimming, which does a remarkably good job of keeping all of that brightness in check. Rarely did we notice any light bloom around brighter objects, including bright, white subtitles during darker shows and movies. Simply put, if you have your heart set on a mini-LED TV, the QN90C is one of the best TVs at implementing that technology.

Gamers will feel right at home with the QN90C, as it offers a full slate of HDMI 2.1 inputs that support 4K gaming up to 144Hz, Auto Low Latency Mode (ALLM), and AMD FreeSync Premium. Like many high-end Samsung TVs this year, the QN90C also supports Samsung's cloud gaming software suite, Gaming Hub. This allows users to access a host of popular cloud gaming services — no console required.

Like all LED TVs, the QN90C doesn't look quite as good when viewed from an off-axis position. We also find the overall software experience to be fussier than Google TV. Nevertheless, the QN90C is one of the best TVs money can buy — especially if you have a bright home.

Pros: Incredibly bright and colorful; impressive local dimming; perfect for dedicated gamers.

Cons: Off-axis viewing isn't as sharp; cluttered smart platform; no Dolby Vision.

THE BEST SMART SPEAKERS

Smart speakers can automatically adjust your thermostat, help you manage your calendar and alert you to potential problems by listening for intruders and smoke alarm sounds. These functional smart devices can also play music or podcasts and make phone calls, becoming a key part of any smart home. • We tested smart speakers to find the ones with the strongest blend of smart home features, audio quality and usability. The **Amazon Echo (4th gen)** is the best smart speaker you can buy because it offers plenty of smarts. It boasts a quick, responsive Alexa assistant, it includes support for Zigbee and Matter smart homes, and it features built-in motion and temperature sensors. • For a portable speaker with a big kick, the **Sonos Era 100** is our choice for best portable and best sound. There are many other quality smart speakers on our list, each with something distinctive to offer.



Best Overall

Amazon Echo (4th gen)

- **Connectivity:** Bluetooth, Wi-Fi (2.4 GHz and 5GHz), 3.5mm line in/out.
- **Special features:** Dolby Audio, Zigbee, Sidewalk compatibility.
- **Smart assistant support:** Amazon Alexa.
- **Weight:** 2.14 pounds.
- **Dimensions (HWD):** 5.2 x 5.7 x 5.7 inches.

The fourth-gen Echo is our pick for the best smart speaker. This fabric-covered orb's modern, minimal aesthetic offers a sleek look for your smart home. It has rich sound for a small speaker and acts as a Zigbee and Matter hub for certain smart home devices. Its built-in temperature sensor helps it deploy smart thermostat automation.

The sound on the fourth-gen Echo is certainly respectable for a speaker that's not much larger than a softball, although it can't compete with the bass produced by larger speakers. Committed Alexa users won't be disappointed in this new Echo, which they can use solo, as a stereo pair or for multiroom music.

Overall, this tiny smart speaker packs a big punch for smart homes, with built-in sensors, support for Zigbee and Matter, and quick voice assistant responses. It comes in several colors, and you can frequently find it on sale via Amazon.

Pros: Fantastic smarts; supports Matter and Zigbee; clear, relatively full sound.

Cons: Distorts at top volume.

The fourth-generation Amazon Echo produces rich sound and is packed with features to manage your smart home. AMAZON

Best Portable

Sonos Era 100

- **Connectivity:** Wi-Fi (2.4GHz and 5GHz), Bluetooth 5.0, USB-C, Apple AirPlay 2, 3.5mm line-in, ethernet with optional combo adapter.

- **Special features:** Trueplay sound adaptation, easy setup, touch surface controls.

- **Smart assistant support:** Amazon Alexa, Sonos Voice Control.

- **Weight:** 4.44 pounds.

- **Dimensions (HWD):** 7.18 x 4.72 x 5.14 inches.

The Sonos Era 100 is a redesign of the **Sonos One** that now includes Bluetooth.

Bluetooth isn't the only improvement Sonos stuffed into the Era 100, which has a marginally larger footprint than the One. The Era 100 has two angled tweeters for better imaging and clarity. Bass response is markedly improved thanks to a larger woofer that easily provides rich, detailed, room-filling sound in a midsize living room.

Trueplay tuning uses the built-in microphones to quickly adapt the sound to the room's acoustics. (A more in-depth Trueplay version is available on iOS, but the fast, onboard version is more than sufficient).

Setup is incredibly easy with the required Sonos app, which also includes dozens of integrated streaming apps including Amazon Music, Apple Music, and Spotify — although the integrated apps don't have quite the functionality as their standalone versions.

There's lots to do within the app, such as deactivating the touch controls for those with curious children, but it can be frustrating to navigate for some.

Alexa and Sonos Voice Control respond quickly and hands-free, and for the privacy-conscious, there's a simple switch on the back of the speaker that disconnects power to the mic.

Pros: Excellent, full sound; plethora of music apps; attractive design.

Cons: Sonos app is cumbersome at times; stereo effect is lackluster.

Best for Google Assistant

Nest Audio

- **Connectivity:** Bluetooth, WiFi (2.4 GHz and 5GHz).
- **Special features:** Stereo pairing.
- **Smart assistant support:** Google Assistant.
- **Weight:** 2.65 pounds.
- **Dimensions (HWD):** 6.9 x 4.9 x 3.1 inches.

The Google Nest Audio offers great performance and sound. It also supports control of your Matter smart home devices.

The sleek design comes in five colors, with three hidden touch controls on top that play or pause music and control the volume. While the bass could be deeper, the speaker puts out crisp and clear sound, even when cranked all the way up.

It has a stereo pairing feature, which allows you to sync two Nest Audio speakers in the same room in stereo through the Google Home app. It can also be paired with other Google smart speakers for sharp, multiroom audio, and it has Google Assistant built in to help control your smart home.

While it doesn't come with any USB-C or auxiliary input ports, it supports both WiFi and Bluetooth connections.

Overall, the Nest Audio is a great option for anyone looking for a Google Assistant-friendly smart speaker for around \$100 that packs in smarts and ear-pleasing sound.

Pros: Matter controller; good sound; stylish, compact design.

Cons: Microphones aren't as sensitive as they could be.

Google's
Nest Audio
speaker.
GOOGLE



Best for Apple HomeKit

HomePod (2nd gen)

- **Connectivity:** 802.11n Wi-Fi, AirPlay, Bluetooth 5, Thread/Matter.
- **Special features:** Touch controls, stereo pairing, spatial audio.
- **Smart assistant support:** Google Assistant.
- **Weight:** 5.16 pounds.
- **Dimensions (HWD):** 6.6 x 5.6 x 5.6 inches.

The second-gen Apple HomePod is the best smart speaker for HomeKit, boozing with impressive sound and intriguing features like support for Spatial Audio, compatibility with Matter smart home devices, and Siri integration. So long as you're not an Android user, it may just be the smart speaker you're looking for.

The HomePod's 4-inch woofer and five tweeters work in unison to deliver powerful sound that fills up a space. It also works as a stereo pair with another HomePod to establish left and right channels for your tunes.



The second-gen Apple HomePod might be exactly what you're looking for — as long as you're not on Android. It works only with iOS devices. BEST BUY

It supports 360-degree Spatial Audio for a more immersive listening experience when using streaming options like Apple Music — and we think it sounds fantastic.

Beyond audio, the second-gen HomePod is quite capable of being a useful smart speaker. It incorporates Matter into the mix, a smart home technology aiming to bridge the compatibility gap

between different brands in your smart home ecosystem.

The HomePod also has temperature and humidity sensors built in, an awfully handy feature if you have a smart thermostat.

Despite perhaps being a step or so behind the likes of Google Assistant or Alexa, Siri brings all the standard conveniences of a smart assistant, including working in tandem with Apple's Find My iPhone feature if you've misplaced your device around the house.

Outside of the \$300 price tag, the one outstanding blemish on the second-generation HomePod is that it works exclusively with Apple products. Meaning, if you're deep in the Android ecosystem, you're out of luck.

That said, Apple owners will be extraordinarily hard-pressed to find a smart speaker that offers a better combination of sound and features tailored to them than the HomePod.

Pros: Well-balanced audio; temperature and humidity sensors; Matter compatible

Cons: Works only with iOS devices.

Best for Small Spaces

Amazon Echo Pop

- **Connectivity:** WiFi (2.4 GHz and 5 GHz), Bluetooth.
- **Special features:** Amazon Side-walk, mesh WiFi extender capabilities with Eero networks, color-changing lighting serves as a notification center.
- **Smart assistant support:** Amazon Alexa, Matter.
- **Weight:** 6.9 ounces.
- **Dimensions (HWD):** 3.6 x 3.9 x 3.3 inches.

The Amazon Echo Pop is the smallest, most affordable Echo smart speaker yet. It supports Matter-enabled devices and works as an Eero WiFi extender. The Echo Pop delivers decent sound quality for a speaker that isn't much larger than your morning cup of espresso. The audio is crisp, clear and just fine for listening to in the background.



The Amazon Echo Pop isn't going to deliver rich, home-filling sound, but that's not its job. It's a great solution for smaller spaces. AMAZON

However, when the volume is all the way up, the Echo Pop struggles a bit with that clear crisp audio. It sounds a bit tinny, especially on hard rock songs. Still, for small spaces like dorm rooms, this is a great pick.

It does not have an audio jack on the back like the Echo Dot does. It only has one port for power meant for use with the included 15W power cord. It comes in fun colors like Lavender and Midnight, as well as standard Echo device colors Charcoal and Glacier White.

The Echo Pop isn't the smart home powerhouse that the fourth- and fifth-gen Echo Dots are. Its size and affordability mean that it lacks the motion and temperature sensors of higher-end Echo speakers.

For less than \$40, though, the bright and cheerful Echo Pop offers quick and easy access to Alexa in one compact size, making it a great smart speaker for small spaces.

Pros: Good-value size and sound; fun design; Matter controller; built-in Eero support.

Cons: No temperature sensors; power cord is white regardless of device color.

Written by Sarah Kovac, John Higgins, Rachel Murphy and Nick Woodard, Reviewed

THE BEST TABLETS OF 2024

Tablets are versatile tools that can be useful in nearly all facets of life. The best tablets are the ultimate workhorses. They enable amazing productivity and allow you to enjoy your favorite games, streaming content, books and websites. But while many tablets might look alike, there's a lot going on under the surface.

After testing a wide variety of today's top-rated devices, we found that Apple's **2024 iPad Air** is the best tablet for the most people. Available for the first time in two sizes — 11 inches and 13 inches — this tablet features the same powerful M2 chipset used in the last-generation iPad Pro. It may not have the same stunning Ultra Retina XDR display as this year's iPad Pro, but your content still will look great on the iPad Air. With its zippy internals, you'll have no problem plowing through any task or game. This, along with its excellent build quality and long support cycle, will keep it serving you well for years to come.

If you're an Android user, the **OnePlus Pad** is an outstanding choice. Its power, build quality and premium feature set make it a tablet to be reckoned with. The ability to pair it with a proprietary keyboard and trackpad case for more productivity is icing on the cake.

If your mobile workflow involves processor-heavy tasks like working in Procreate, Logic or Final Cut Pro and you want to slash through your to-do list as quickly as possible, we recommend the seventh-generation **iPad Pro (2024)**. It's available at 11 inches or 13 inches. The raw horsepower provided by its M4 chipset, its brilliant display and its internal storage options make it one of the best tablets we've ever reviewed.

Finally, for those who want a tablet that can provide the most focused productivity experience possible, we recommend the **reMarkable 2**.

Whether you're trying to get serious work done on the move or just stream a movie, there's a great tablet in this guide just waiting for you.

Best Tablet

Apple iPad Air (13-inch, 2024)



SASHA ZIDAR/REVIEWED

- **Dimensions:** 11.04 x 8.46 x 0.24 inches (13-inch model, as reviewed).
- **Weight:** 1.36 pounds.
- **OS:** Apple iPadOS.
- **Screen size:** 11 inches or 13 inches,
- **Resolution:** 2732 x 2048.
- **CPU:** M2 chip, 8-core CPU, 10-core GPU, 16-core Neural Engine.
- **Storage options:** 128GB, 256GB, 512GB, 1TB.

In previous years, many people bought an iPad Pro simply because it was the only option if you wanted a large-screen tablet within Apple's walled-garden ecosystem of apps. In June 2024, though, Apple presented folks with a new option: a 13-inch iPad Air — an enlarged tablet the same size as the far more expensive iPad Pro.

This incredibly capable device runs on much of the same guts as the last generation iPad Pro. Its M2 processor is more than up to the task of general computing and streaming. It can even hold its own with AAA games downloaded from the App Store or demanding apps like Logic Pro.

That said, it has its flaws. Despite being less expensive than an iPad Pro, the iPad Air is still one of the priciest tablets out there. It has no water protection rating. And then there's iPad OS. The team behind Apple's tablet operating system has made huge strides in making it more multitasking-friendly and have tinkered to improve its user-accessible file system. But it still has a long way to go before power users can consider an iPad as a desktop or laptop replacement.

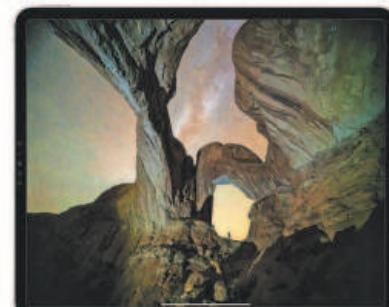
Even so, its combination of price, features, support and excellent build quality make it a great choice for anyone in need of a solid tablet.

Pros: Bigger 13-inch size; more affordable alternative to iPad Pro; camera in right place for video calls

Cons: OS is still limiting; expensive accessories; not water resistant

Best Tablet for Professionals

Apple iPad Pro (11-inch, 2024)



APPLE

- **Dimensions:** 9.83 x 6.99 x 0.21 inches (11-inch model).
- **Weight:** 0.98 pounds.
- **OS:** iPad OS.
- **Screen size:** 11 inches or 13 inches.
- **Resolution:** 2420 x 1968.
- **CPU:** M4 chip, up to 10-core CPU and GPU, 16-core Neural Engine.
- **Storage options:** 256GB, 512GB, 1TB, or 2TB.

Available with either an 11-inch or 13-inch display, the 2024 iPad Pro is, simply put, the best tablet Apple has ever made. Its powerful M4 chipset allows it to plow through heavy-lift tasks like video editing, multi-track audio production, and playing AAA desktop games. And, thanks to its bright, brilliant Ultra Retina XDR display, anything viewed on it will look stunning. What's more, while it might be the thinnest device Apple's ever released, it's sturdy enough, provided you treat it with respect, to last for years of faithful service.

All of these perks come at a high price — especially when the cost of extras such as a Magic Keyboard case, Apple Pencil Pro or AppleCare+ warranty are factored in. A comparable MacBook Air can be had for less. And, while iPad OS has come a long way in recent years, the operating system still doesn't provide the desktop-class experience that many require for a tablet to truly become their primary work machine. Professionals and enthusiasts who want/need the raw power and versatility that only an iPad Pro can deliver won't be disappointed with this beast of a tablet.

Pros: Thin but sturdy; massive processing power; gorgeous display.

Cons: Expensive; iPadOS still suffers from limitations; last-generation Wi-Fi.

Best Compact Tablet

Apple iPad Mini (2021)



APPLE

- **Dimensions:** 7.69 x 5.3 x 0.25 inches.
- **Weight:** 10.4 ounces.
- **OS:** Apple iPadOS.
- **Screen size:** 8.3 inches.
- **Resolution:** 2266 x 1488.
- **CPU:** Apple A15.
- **Storage options:** 64GB, 256GB.

The iPad Mini is defined by its size. It's easy to hold for longer periods of time, even when reclining or gripping the device one-handed. It's ideal for taking notes with the second-gen Apple Pencil. You can support it comfortably with one hand while writing with the other.

Performance remains excellent. It outperforms the base iPad, landing closer to the iPad Air, and it's quicker than most similarly priced PC laptops. During testing, it was great as a day-to-day use device for tasks like streaming video, reading and answering emails. But it can also power through heavier apps like 3D games and photo editors.

We do have a few complaints. The display is good but not as bright and enjoyable as that on iPad Pro models. Multitasking can be difficult due to the display's compact size. Like the iPad Air, the Mini lacks Face ID login and relies on Touch ID, which is inconveniently bundled into the power button.

Still, the iPad Mini is the best choice for small-tablet enthusiasts. Few competitors exist — and those that do, like Amazon's Fire HD 8 and Samsung's Galaxy Tab Lite, are far less powerful. The iPad Mini is as capable as the current-generation iPad Air but smaller.

Pros: Light, portable and easy to handle; perfect for use with Apple Pencil; superb performance.

Cons: Unimpressive display; not great for multitasking; no Face ID.

Best Android Tablet

OnePlus Pad



REVIEWED

- **Dimensions:** 9.74 x 7.02 x 0.24 inches.
- **Weight:** 1.02 pounds.
- **OS:** Android 13.
- **Screen size:** 11.6 inches.
- **Resolution:** 2800 x 2000.
- **CPU:** MediaTek Dimensity 9000 processor.
- **Storage:** 128GB.

The OnePlus Pad is an impressive first-generation Android tablet that gets so much right that it's easy to overlook its few faults. Its MediaTek Dimensity 9000 processor and 8GB of RAM make it ideal for resource-hungry apps, such as Adobe Lightroom and Diablo Immortal. The design is modern, lightweight and of the highest build quality. We love that the OnePlus Pad supports Wi-Fi 6 and Bluetooth 5.3, two speedy standards that improve the tablet's overall performance. We were disappointed, however, by its 128GB of storage, with no option to upgrade via Micro SD card. With the increasing size of apps, video, and audio files, you could run out of room fast.

While testing this tablet, we experienced a number of software glitches, including in setting the tablet up for the first time, and a malfunctioning on-screen keyboard. But again, this is a first-generation device. OnePlus will no doubt correct these problems in a software update. Although the additional accessories required to get the most out of the tablet can increase the cost of ownership, the OnePlus Pad's fast and powerful performance, along with its outstanding build quality and fast charging capabilities, make it a good option.

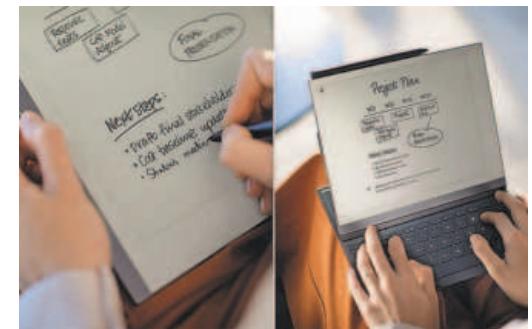
Despite its flaws, this is an outstanding device that's a great option for anyone in the market for a high-end Android tablet.

Pros: Outstanding build quality; fast charging; fast and powerful.

Cons: Only available with 128GB of storage.

Best Tablet for Productivity

reMarkable 2



REMARKABLE

- **Dimensions:** 7.4 x 9.6 x 0.19 inches.
- **Weight:** 0.89 pounds.
- **Screen Size:** 10.3 inches.
- **Screen resolution:** 226 PPI.
- **Storage:** 8GB.

The reMarkable 2 isn't a conventional tablet. It's designed with one purpose in mind: distraction-free productivity. When it comes to note-taking, planning, drawing diagrams, or typing up the first draft of an assignment or a chapter of your latest book, this E-Ink tablet is an absolute beast. Primarily, the reMarkable 2 is designed to be used with a stylus; the device's textured display glass and wide selection of templates make it the closest thing we've found to scribbling on paper in the digital world. It can convert your handwriting to text and fire it off in an email or, sync with your smartphone, tablet and computer, where you can add typed notes to your work in the reMarkable app. Speaking of typing, while it might be pricey, at \$199, adding the reMarkable Type Folio into the mix transforms your paper-free writing machine into a word processor designed for focused writing.

Of course, this device isn't without its shortcomings. We've been unimpressed by the slow speed at which it syncs data with reMarkable's desktop and mobile apps. Additionally, the tablet's display has no front or back lighting — an issue for anyone wanting to do a bit of work with the lights down low. Finally, while it may be able to be used as an e-reader (ePub and PDF files, only), it's not a very good one. While improvements to its e-reader software have been made over the past year, the user experience is spartan, at best.

Pros: Large, light and solidly built; offers a superior digital note-taking experience; allows for e-book and PDF annotations.

Cons: No front or back lighting; limited file compatibility; slow cloud service sync speed.



THE BEST GAMING LAPTOPS OF 2024

The best gaming laptops these days have high refresh rates, high-resolution displays and the latest graphics cards and processors. Getting outstanding gaming performance that's portable and saves you the hassle of building your own desktop gaming rig — sounds pretty great, right? Not to mention it can be cheaper to get a gaming laptop instead of a desktop.

Our pick for the best overall gaming laptop is the **Asus ROG Zephyrus G16**, a surprisingly thin and light computer that packs maxed-out processors and graphics cards for a lower price than most of its competitors. However, if you have specific preferences — such as keyboard placement, battery life or portability, or you're working with a tight budget — we've reviewed plenty of other great laptops so you can find the model that's perfect for you.

Written by **Adrien Ramirez, Matthew S. Smith and Joanna Nelius**, Reviewed

Best Gaming Laptop

Asus ROG Zephyrus G16 (2024)

- **Processor:** Intel Core Ultra 9 185H, 16 cores, 22 threads (six performance cores, eight efficient cores, two low-power efficient cores), max boost clock speed 5.1GHz.
- **Graphics:** Nvidia RTX 4070 8GB GDDR6 (discrete), Intel Arc integrated graphics.
- **Memory:** 16GB LPDDR5X at 7467MHz (soldered).
- **Storage:** 1TB NVMe PCIe 4.0 SSD.
- **Display:** 16-inch, 2560 x 1600, 240Hz OLED Display HDR 500.
- **Battery life:** 6+ hours.

The Asus ROG Zephyrus G16 is a marvel. It's just over a half-inch thick and relatively light at 4.3 pounds, but within that MacBook-esque footprint, it crams some of the most powerful hardware you can get in a laptop. Whether you need a content creation laptop for 3D modeling or you're a hardcore gamer, you will be well served by the performance and vibrant display.

Although the ROG Zephyrus G16 doesn't set battery-life records, its six-hour capacity is enough to get through most of a workday of web browsing and productivity tasks. (But remember that more intensive tasks like running games will drain the battery faster.) Similarly, its solid aluminum chassis isn't quite as refined as that of the Razer Blade 16, but it's nonetheless a cut above most laptops with good looks and great ergonomics.

Best of all, the ROG Zephyrus G16 is one of the cheapest laptops you can buy with a mobile Nvidia RTX 4070, 4080 or 4090 graphics card. On average, it's about \$1,000 cheaper than equivalent Razer Blade 16 or Dell XPS 16 laptops. None of these can replace a gaming desktop PC due to thermal constraints, but a true desktop replacement like the MSI Titan 18X would cost two to three times as much.

Most people will find that the RTX 4070 model we tested is more than powerful enough to smoothly run demanding games at 4K with maxed-out graphics settings. And unlike a desktop replacement, the ROG Zephyrus G16 is practical enough to take with you wherever you go. You won't out yourself as a gamer from the looks of the chassis alone, but you'll still have one of the fastest laptops you could bring to an esports tournament or LAN party.

Pros: Thin and light; display has great motion clarity; solid gaming performance.

Cons: Design is a step behind the best; suboptimal battery life.

Continued on Page 30

HALO SELECT

WI-FI AND MATTER ENABLED SMART LOCK

Kwikset



SEAMLESS INTEGRATION, UNMATCHED SECURITY.

The smarter lock for a
smarter home.

WiFi® matter



SCAN FOR
THE NEXT-GEN
SMART LOCK



Kwikset
App

works with



works with
Google Home



Works with
Apple Home

GEAR UP BEST TECH GADGETS FOR THE SEASON

Jennifer Jolly Special to USA TODAY

Fall is the ideal time for tech makers to show off their latest do-everything devices to win you over — or, rather, to win your every last dime — just in time for the holidays.

But we've lived with a menagerie of shiny, bright, glowy, smart (or *smartish*) gadgets for several years now. What's worth your time, energy and hard-earned money?

Here's a handful of newer gadgets that solve everyday problems and make our lives a bit easier without breaking the bank.

A scratch- and smudge-resistant laptop

You know what won't need a whole lot of cleaning? The ASUS Zenbook S 16 (starting at \$1,400), a premium laptop made with a mix of ceramic and aluminum mainly used in the aerospace and luxury watch industries. That means it's scratch- and smudge-resistant. It's super lightweight yet durable and houses a 3K display, six speakers and super robust hardware for all the work, study, entertainment and gaming you could ever do.



Also? The quick-access Copilot AI Assistant key delivers handy doses of artificial intelligence so you can streamline your workflows and sail through your to-do list.

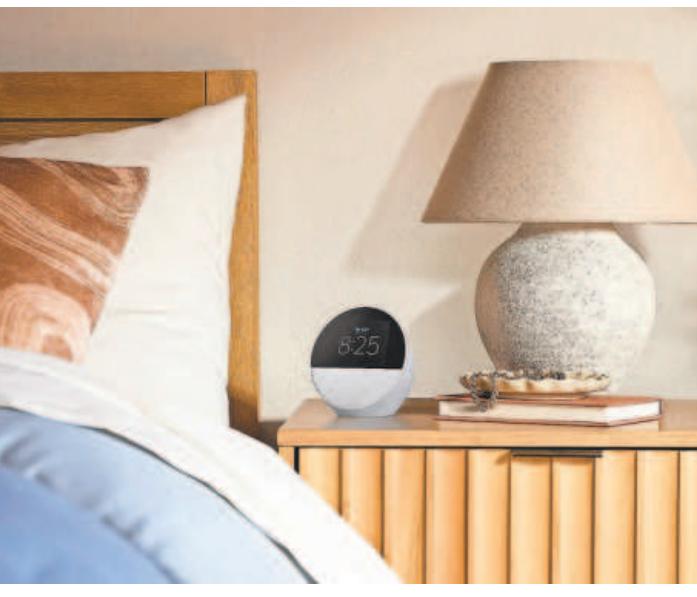
A little help putting the phone down for the night

By now, we all know that our cell phones mess with our sleep. It's not just the light from our gadgets confusing our brains into thinking it's still daytime. It's also the constant notifications and magnetic pull of FOMO to "just check one more time" in the middle of the night that's making us all cranky and tired. It has to stop already.

The Amazon Echo Spot 2024 is a great new "smart alarm clock" option that wakes you up, keeps you connected much more subtly and helps you start — or end — your day right.

It's built for the nightstand and has a display that makes it easy to set alarms and see the time, weather or song titles at a glance. You can customize the clock faces and colors and ask Alexa to play your "Go to Bed" or "Rise and Shine" playlist. You can also use it to check the weather and set routines like "turn off all the lights" at night or "turn on the connected coffee pot" before you even roll out of bed.

It comes in three colors and costs just under \$80.



AMAZON

Cleaning kit for gross gadgets

Our gadgets are gross. Smartphones carry 10 times more bacteria than a toilet seat, and earbuds have 2,700 times more bacteria than a kitchen cutting board. Keyboards and remote controls — all of it is just, ew.

I clean all my gadgets at least once a week with tools I already have around my house. But how often do I carry a soft-bristle toothbrush, toothpick, cotton swabs and safe cleaning fluid everywhere I go? Never.

For cleaning on the go, the VICHIE 20-in-1 multifunctional cleaning kit saves the day dealing with a gross gadget.

I like that it's low-priced, self-contained and has a ton of different tools, yet it's compact enough to fit in a purse or backpack.

That said, it's cheap (\$13 on Amazon) and feels like it. Among the included tools are an AirPod cleaner pen, flocking sponge, mini soft brush, lens brush, camera brush, screen cleaner spray and even a lid that doubles as a wiping cloth. You won't feel like a pro cleaner with these, but they do the job in a pinch, especially when your keyboard sticks on a plane.



A water bottle that carbonates

One of my favorite fall gadgets is this portable bottle that carbonates your go-to water of choice — anywhere, anytime, at the push of a button. The 16-ounce Aer1 water bottle, from a small startup in Brooklyn, New York, called Aerflo, comes with finger-size carbonation capsules filled with beverage-grade CO₂.

Pop a capsule into the little canister under the lid, screw the lid back on, then tap the top to fizz it all up.

This worked well and was incredibly simple to set up and use. Scan a QR code to get a step-by-step guide along with pro tips, like the colder the water you put in, the more bubbles you get right away. I also found out that juice doesn't work as well — because the juice molecules "get in the way" of the CO₂ — so it's best to add flavors to the water after you carbonate it.

The system comes with 13 reusable CO₂ capsules, each capable of carbonating the equivalent of four 16 oz. water bottles. When a capsule runs out, you replace it with a new one from the included pack and send the old one back to the company in a prelabeled, prepaid included mailer. The company says this costs up to 70% less than buying single-use bottles or cans. The cost is \$99 for the bottle and 13 capsules.



AERFLO



ASTROAI

A tire inflator that fits in your cupholder

The AstroAI L7 Tire Inflator (\$21 at the time of publication) is an on-the-go emergency tire pump that supports up to eight car tire refills, yet weighs only about 1 pound and fits into most car cupholders.

It's great for bike tires, basketballs and everything you need to add air to from time to time without pumping it by hand or blowing so hard your eyeballs feel like they'll pop out.

I like the bright screen on the front of the device, which updates pressure data 200 times per second so you don't overfill your tires. It's also a handy emergency tool with a built-in three-mode flashlight (flashlight, SOS, strobe) and USB-C/USB ports for device charging.



All your content in the palm of your hand

This is a world first and a no-brainer. WD's My Passport Drive (starts at \$70) holds worlds of info so you'll never, ever, ever lose a precious photo, video or school or work assignment ever again.

The company says it's the world's first 2.5-inch portable hard drive to hold 6 terabytes (TB) of content. That's enough space for around 1.5 million photos, 600 hours of full HD movies and up to 1.8 million eBooks. Yet the gadget itself is small enough to fit in the palm of your hand and tough enough to take along on all your adventures.



WD

Continued from Page 26

Best Value Gaming Laptop

Lenovo Legion Pro 5i Gen 8 (2023)



TIMOTHY RENZ/REVIEWED

- **Processor:** Intel Core i7-13700HX, 16 cores, 24 threads (eight performance cores, eight efficient cores), max boost clock speed 5.0GHz.
- **Graphics:** Nvidia RTX 4060 8GB GDDR6 (discrete), Intel UHD integrated graphics.
- **Memory:** 16GB DDR5 at 4800MHz.
- **Storage:** 512GB NVMe PCIe 4.0 SSD.
- **Display:** 16-inch, 2560 x 1600, 165Hz IPS DisplayHDR 400.
- **Battery life:** 2.5+ hours.

The Lenovo Legion 5i Pro Gen 8 has the best performance you can get from a midrange gaming laptop at a midtier price. It's built more like a thick and heavy hardback book and has a sad, short battery life, but if you're after the best ratio of performance to price, here it is.

Its dedicated graphics card can handle up to 140 watts and easily outdoes gaming laptops configured with an RTX 4070 set to draw 100 watts or less. But you can also take advantage of Nvidia DLSS 3.0 and scale the display's resolution to max out the graphics and turn on the ray tracing in high-fidelity games and still get way above 60 frames per second. This laptop's processor can also handle heavy workloads in 3D rendering, video editing, and much more.

We'd be remiss if we didn't mention how much we appreciate Lenovo sticking with its phenomenal keyboard and trackpad design — always crafting a delicate balance so the keys don't feel too hard or too soft to actuate, so the trackpad doesn't feel like an ice rink after the first period of a hockey game. Even the IPS display has a robust color gamut and gets decently bright.

Pros: Fully powered graphics card; excellent cooling; lots of ports.

Cons: Heavy; chunky; poor battery life.

Best 14-inch Gaming Laptop

Asus ROG Zephyrus G14 (2024)

- **Processor:** AMD Ryzen 9 8945HS processor (eight cores, 16 threads), max boost clock speed 5.2GHz.
- **Graphics:** Nvidia RTX 4060 mobile 8GB GDDR6 (discrete), AMD Radeon 780M integrated graphics.
- **Memory:** 16GB DDR5 at 6400MHz (soldered).
- **Storage:** 1TB PCIe 4.0 NVMe M.2 SSD.
- **Display:** 14-inch, 2880 x 1800 at 120Hz OLED DisplayHDR 500.
- **Battery life:** 12 hours.

While the Asus ROG Zephyrus G16 is the best laptop for gamers who occasionally go outside, the 2024 Asus ROG Zephyrus G14 is the best laptop for people who want a highly portable PC without sacrificing gaming performance. The 2023 model exists for the no-compromises crowd that needs an Nvidia RTX 4090 in a 14-inch laptop — but for everyone else, the 2024 G14 is one beast of a laptop.

The ROG Zephyrus G14 packs an AMD Ryzen 9 8945HS processor and an Nvidia RTX 4060 or RTX 4070 graphics card. Our review unit, configured with the RTX 4060, runs "Cyberpunk 2077" at 1080p with maxed-out graphics at 72 frames per second without ray tracing and 33 fps with ray tracing enabled. A more typically demanding game like "Far Cry 6" runs at about 90 fps on the same graphics settings. It's right on target with what you should expect from any gaming laptop with the same internal specs.

What sets the ROG Zephyrus G14 apart from similarly powerful competitors like the Lenovo Legion Slim 5 or Razer Blade 14 are its next-level display, chassis and battery life. It lasted 12 hours in our battery test, setting a new record for gaming laptops overall. Meanwhile, its 240Hz OLED display and impeccably clean audio are a delight, as are the smooth trackpad and keyboard.

Somehow, Asus managed to make this powerful, long-lasting laptop about as thin as a MacBook with a gorgeous all-aluminum chassis, and all for \$1,600 (or less on sale). It's an extremely well-balanced laptop in just about every regard, so long as you want a smaller gaming laptop over a 16-inch one.

Pros: Fantastic performance; gorgeous OLED screen; 12-hour battery life.

Cons: Soldered-on memory; fewer graphics card configurations than in previous years.

Best Gaming Laptop Under \$1,000

Acer Nitro 16 (2023)

- **Processor:** AMD Ryzen 5 7640HS (six cores, 12 threads), max boost clock speed 5GHz.
- **Graphics:** Nvidia RTX 4050 6GB GDDR6 (discrete), AMD Radeon 760M integrated graphics.
- **Memory:** 16GB DDR5 at 5600MHz.
- **Storage:** 512GB PCIe 4.0 NVMe M.2 SSD.
- **Display:** 16-inch, 1920 x 1200, 165Hz IPS.
- **Battery life:** 7.5+ hours.

Formerly the Acer Nitro 5 series, the 2023 Acer Nitro 16 sports a delicate and classy design on the lid in colors reminiscent of the "Jazz" disposable cup design of the '90s. It has all the ports you could ever need, and the battery life is an outstanding improvement — a four-hour increase — over the 2022 Nitro 5. Every iteration of the Acer Nitro lineup keeps getting better and better.

Its gaming performance is equivalent to or slightly below the previous generation with an RTX 3060 or RTX 3050 Ti, but not only are Nvidia's 40-series cards more power efficient, they are the only ones compatible with DLSS 3.0, Nvidia's resolution upscaling technology that now uses AI to generate frames in-game. With it turned on in compatible games, this entry-level gaming laptop is capable of reaching or exceeding its display refresh rate.

Pros: Great gaming performance for the price; good battery life; plenty of ports and connection types.

Cons: Subpar sound; bundled with too much useless software.



ACER





THE BEST GAMING MONITOR OF 2024

The best gaming monitor looks different depending on what you need. Maybe you're after a 21:9 aspect ratio. Maybe you're after a higher resolution, so a 1440p gaming monitor (or even 4K), or to upgrade to a higher refresh rate to complement that top-tier graphics card you just bought. Or maybe you want to upgrade to one of the best curved gaming monitors, which can make a noticeable difference in the way you work and play.

The best gaming monitors also support adaptive sync, including AMD FreeSync and Nvidia G-Sync, which reduces screen tearing while gaming; offer response times of 1ms or lower; and have good HDR capabilities.

While good gaming monitors can be expensive, they aren't all created equal. If you want the absolute best gaming monitor on the market, look no further than the **Alienware AW3225QF**. It gives you the feel of an extra-big, extra-fast gaming monitor for less than the average ultra wide-screen display, with excellent color accuracy.

Written by **Matthew S. Smith, Mark Knapp and Jonathan Hilburg**, Reviewed

Alienware AW3225QF

- **Screen size:** 32 inches.
- **Resolution:** 3840 x 2160 pixels.
- **Refresh rate:** 240Hz.

Alienware was the first to market with Samsung's third-generation QD-OLED panels for gaming monitors, and the results are nothing short of phenomenal. The 32-inch, 240Hz, 4K OLED Alienware AW3225QF doesn't compromise in any aspect.

Expect the nearly perfect black levels and instant pixel refresh times that all OLED displays offer, but married to a number of quality-of-life features that past WOLED and QD-OLED monitors neglected. First and foremost, color reproduction, gamut and accuracy are fantastic. After calibration, we measured an average DeltaE value — the difference between a target value and what's actually measured — at only 0.57, which is virtually perfect. Gaming performance is phenomenal, and content looks vibrant and realistic across every format. Just browsing the Steam storefront looks leaps and bounds better than on an IPS or VA panel.

That effect is enhanced further when HDR is enabled. Shadows are appropriately moody and retain detail thanks to the effectively infinite contrast ratio, and highlights get just as bright as

you'd expect from a monitor this expensive. To top it off, HDR on the AW3225QF is astoundingly color-accurate; we measured an average DeltaE of only 0.93 with it enabled. It's accurate and bright enough to leave on even when not gaming.

The Alienware AW3225QF's secret weapons are the features you can use every day. It has an integrated USB hub and can easily push a uniform 220-plus nits when an all-white screen is displayed, making it bright enough for writing and filling out spreadsheets. Switching between brighter and darker objects doesn't cause a rapid dimming or brightening like with other OLED displays, and even the port selection and OSD menus are plentiful and easy to use.

If 32 inches is too large for your setup, the Alienware AW2725DF is a good compromise at 27 inches. With a 360Hz maximum refresh rate, it offers even better motion clarity.

Combined with excellent viewing angles and a curve so gentle that it's easy to forget it exists, the AW3225QF is an all-around winner. If you can snag it on sale for \$1,000 or less, it's a no-brainer.

Pros: No brightness fluctuations even on full-white screens; vivid, accurate color; packed with ports and quality-of-life features.

Cons: Might be too large for some.

THE BEST GAMING HEADSET OF 2024

The best gaming headset should be more than a set of headphones with a microphone tacked on the side. You need crisp, clear voice transference, a snug and cozy fit for long gaming sessions, and sound that places everything perfectly in space.

After testing dozens of gaming headsets, we're confident that the **SteelSeries Arctis Pro** is the best you can get right now. It offers a great mix of features, incredible long-term comfort and excellent sound placement.

If you're after a high-end gaming experience with crystal-clear sound, deep feature customization options, and luxurious comfort, you don't have to drop a bundle of cash to get a solid gaming headset. Just look to the sub-\$80 **HyperX Cloud III**.

Written by **Nicole Carpenter, Lee Neikirk, John Higgins, Joanna Nelius and Christopher Coke**, Reviewed

SteelSeries Arctis Pro

- **Connection type:** USB, 3.5mm jack.
- **Noise canceling:** Microphone only.
- **Supported systems:** PC, Mac, PlayStation 4 and 5, Xbox One, Nintendo Switch, Mobile.

One of the most comfortable gaming headsets on the market, the SteelSeries Arctis Pro uses a flexible suspension band to customize size, with super-soft ear cups that let you game for hours — even while wearing glasses. Comfort alone isn't enough reason to buy a wired gaming headset that keeps you tethered to your station, but the Arctis Pro is often on sale and offers plenty of reasons to pick it up.

Both music and games sound fantastic using the Arctis Pro. We played both quiet indie games and loud, booming matches of "Overwatch 2" with this headset and were pleased with all of them. The headset balances soft music with in-game sound effects, like the crunching of grass beneath your character's feet, with excellent subtlety.

In first-person shooters, we were able to clearly distinguish allies' voices from in-game noise. That's largely thanks to the mixer that comes with the SteelSeries, which makes for a perfectly customizable balance between game and chat.

Customization includes an equalizer that lets you change frequencies without any extra software. Just note that although this one will work with Xbox consoles if you connect the 3.5mm headphone jack through a controller, you may not get the full functionality — for that, you'll need to check out the Turtle Beach Recon 500 (our Best for Xbox pick), or the upgraded pick SteelSeries Arctis Nova Pro.

Pros: Great for gaming; top-notch sound; comfortable.

Cons: Limited compatibility with Xbox.

THE BEST HEADPHONES

Whether you're a fan of traditional over-the-ear headphones or you prefer wireless earbuds, you probably spend a lot of time with your chosen headset. It's important to find the most comfortable fit and the best sound for your budget. Our team has tested hundreds of pairs of headphones to measure sound quality, fit, battery life, noise canceling and other factors to determine which are the best of the best.

Currently, our pick for best headphones are the **Sony WH-1000XM4**. They are extremely comfortable and offer amazing sound, incredible noise cancellation and a barrel full of modern features without an audiophile price tag, especially now that they're regularly found on sale.

We've got plenty of other options for different use cases and budgets. So whether you need nimble wireless workout earbuds, noise-canceling specialists for airplane trips or something in between, you'll probably find what you're looking for here.

Written by **Lee Neikirk, John Higgins, Michael Garrett Steele, Ryan Waniata and Nick Woodard**, Reviewed

Best Earbuds

Sony WF-1000XM5

The competition for the designation of best earbuds is fierce from year to year. Apple had bumped the Sony WF-1000XM4 with the AirPods Pro 2, and now Sony has done the same to Apple.

The WF-1000XM5's noise-canceling performance might be incremental rather than a leap in performance, but they still slightly exceed both the AirPods Pro 2 and the Bose QuietComfort Earbuds II. While the XM5 let in a little more of a low-frequency airplane drone, they don't have the added high-end

hiss found on the Bose and Apple products. Plus, they do a better job attenuating troublesome midrange frequencies like coffeehouse chatter.

The WF-1000XM5 do beat the QCEII and AirPods Pro 2 in two important ways. Sound quality for both music and calls far exceeds the performance of the Bose, and unlike the AirPods, the XM5 function equally well with Apple and Android products. Getting a solid fit can take some effort, but overall there isn't a better pair of wireless earbuds available.

Pros: Class-leading active noise canceling (ANC); excellent sound; works with both Apple and Android.

Cons: Fit takes fiddling.



Sony WH-1000XM4

Comfortable and light with amazing sound and noise canceling, the Sony WH-1000XM4 over-ear headphones get a whole lot right. They offer unique features like Quick Attention, which pauses the music and illuminates your surroundings when you put your hand over the right cup. They also support multipoint pairing for connecting to two Bluetooth devices at once, so you can switch between music on your phone and Zoom calls on your computer.

Sony's Headphones Connect app is well thought-out, letting you control EQ transparency mode and more. But you don't need to dive into customization to appreciate the quality. Their comfort is readily apparent, and their noise canceling is so fine-tuned that it can adjust to everything from "glasses wearers" to "barometric pressure." Despite all the options, the controls are simple and intuitive, including physical keys and touch controls. You also get 30 hours of battery life. This is a top-tier headset, and we've yet to find anything better at this price point.

Pros: Excellent audio quality; top-notch noise canceling; all-day comfort.

Cons: Effective operation has a learning curve.



Best Earbuds for iPhone

Apple AirPods Pro (2nd Gen)

Apple's AirPods Pro (2nd generation) push the success of the original AirPods Pro even further. You may not be able to tell the difference by looking at them, but the new model features better battery life, sound and noise canceling. Plus, an update added USB-C to the AirPods Pro 2 case to replace the aging Lightning connector and improve their IP rating to IP54.

The noise canceling is truly something special, even beating out over-ear options like Sony's WH-1000XM5.

Adaptive Transparency mode is clearer and more natural-sounding than ever. It can also attenuate external noise to 85dB in real time. It's no substitute for proper ear protection, but it's nice to have. Add in better bass response, clearer sound, fantastic call quality, and a light 5.4-gram weight, and you've got some of the best earbuds we've ever tested.

The new case is great for folks who misplace their earbuds, adding a speaker system that helps you find it when it's lost and precision tracking with the Find My app.

It's hard to find significant negatives, but there are a handful of improvements we'd like to see. The battery life could be better, and we wish there was more control over audio like EQ and ANC control. Also, Android users are out of luck for any kind of app or settings menu.

That said, the new AirPods Pro are easily the best earbuds you can buy for the Apple ecosystem. As long as you have an iPhone to use them with and the cash to spare, it's an easy choice.

Pros: Next-gen noise canceling; adaptive transparency mode; sound and battery boost.

Cons: No EQ or ANC adjustment; no separate app for Android.

Best Noise Canceling Headphones

Sony WH-1000XM5

Sony's WH-1000XM5 are a more than worthy successor to our top pick, the XM4. The price difference is drastic enough that we hesitate to put them on top of our list. However, if you're willing to shell out for the best combination of overall package and ANC performance, here it is.

The 1000XM5 reimagines Sony's 1000XM line, with more oval-shaped ear cups similar to Apple's AirPods Max. The plush cups and headband are covered in synthetic leather, offering more comfort for longer stretches of use.

There are a lot of noteworthy improvements, but the incredible adaptive noise canceling is chief among them. It does a fantastic job of canceling out droning sounds like fans and engines. It turns in an impressively strong performance on high-frequency sounds, as well, enabled by dual ANC chipsets and eight dedicated microphones.

It's far and away some of the best ANC performance we've ever seen in over-ear headphones. The only sets that top it are Bose's QC45 and QuietComfort Earbuds II, and Apple's AirPods Pro (2nd gen). But none of those can compare to the XM5 when it comes to sound quality.

Speaking of that sound quality, it's an improvement in definition and dynamics over the XM4. It offers brilliant detail for any genre, especially once you've optimized the EQ in the Sony Headphones app.

The app also does a great job of making the wild list of features easy to manage. It's where you'll adjust EQ and transparency mode, as well as those great 1000XM features we love, like multipoint pairing and Quick Attention. The touch controls and 30-hour battery life are the same as on the XM4, though this set charges faster.

Pros: Lush, powerful sound; top-notch comfort and features; incredible noise canceling.

Cons: Same battery as XM4.

Best Value Earbuds

Anker Soundcore Space A40

Anker's Soundcore Space A40 is the best offering we've seen from a company that was already making remarkably powerful noise-canceling earbuds at budget prices. They punch well above their price point to compete with heavy-hitters like the Jabra Elite 5.

The adaptive active noise canceling is great for low drones like air conditioner hums or airplane cabin noise. It can even take the edge off of nearby coffee shop conversations. Two transparency mode options let you pick between hearing everything or focusing on letting voices through for quick conversations.

The default sound profile is all right, but the midrange is drowned out somewhat by a piercing high end and strong bass. The good news is that the app features an eight-band EQ to customize.

To go further, the HearID Sound feature profiles your hearing perception and creates a personalized EQ curve. It works pretty well, and it's certainly better than the default. Hi-res audio and LDAC are both supported.

Touch controls include single tap, double tap and two-second hold. Each of those can be assigned to a variety of controls like volume, track selection, or sound profile selections. They can also be turned off so you don't accidentally skip a track while adjusting your earbuds.

On top of the strong sound and great features, these earbuds include a wireless-charging case. All in all, the Anker Space A40 are our new gold standard for earbud performance at such a low price point.

Pros: Amazing ANC for the price; customizable sound profiles; great battery life.

Cons: Little sizzly out of the box; lows can cover vocals.

Best On-Ear Headphones

Beats Solo 4 Wireless

Going back to the original Beats By Dre Studio headphones, Beats has created some of the most iconic headphones on the market, but none were more successful than the Beats Solo 3. They were so popular that Beats didn't feel the need to update them until 2024 — eight years after their release. The Beats Solo 4 are worthy successors.

The Beats Solo 4 aren't so much a revolution but an evolution of the Solo 3. The look is almost identical, with some muted pastel colorways (Cloud Pink and Slate Blue) in addition to the traditional Matte Black. They have well-tuned sound (albeit leaning more toward the mid and high end than bass), they fold up nicely for travel, they have incredible battery life, and they're compatible with both iOS and Android.

There are a few surprising omissions, though, especially when compared with current headphones. The most notable is no active noise cancellation. This wasn't so out of the ordinary with the Beats Solo 3, but now you can regularly find really good ANC on headphones and earbuds under \$100, let alone those around the Solo 4's MSRP of \$199. Tied to the lack of ANC is no transparency mode for better world awareness while out and about. There also isn't any way to EQ the sound. This isn't a dealbreaker, but those looking for a bit bassier response will be disappointed.

Regardless of the drawbacks, the Beats Solo 4 are the best on-ear headphones available, especially when on sale. There's nothing else out there that compares.

Pros: Well-tuned sound; amazing battery life; iOS and Android compatibility.

Cons: No active noise cancellation; no sound equalization.



Sarah Michelle Dupont uses a Meta Quest 2 headset for a virtual reality experience that simulates being caught in a rip current. Dupont was one of eight winners of college scholarships for students who have worked to further beach safety. KATIE NICKAS/CORPUS CHRISTI CALLER-TIMES/USA TODAY NETWORK

THE BEST VR HEADSETS

1. Meta Quest 2

If you're in the market for a VR headset, the Meta Quest 2 (formerly known as the Oculus Quest 2) is probably already on your radar. As far as stand-alone hardware goes, it's the dominant product in the space right now without much serious competition. It's a fabulous VR experience that builds on the foundation laid by the Oculus Rift.

It's clear this is a high-quality product, sturdy and well designed. But getting it set up properly is crucial, and you'll want to be aware of what you're getting into. Our reviewer, for example, wears glasses, has very long eyelashes and isn't generally fond of Facebook as a social media platform.

Once you get through the brief but annoying set-up process (you'll need to make a Meta account if you don't want to link it to your Facebook), the Quest 2 is fairly comfortable to use.

In terms of carrying a large piece of hardware on your face, the Quest 2 is highly adjustable and cozy to have on. But the thought of using one frequently, for years, made our reviewer want to consider switching back to contact lenses. No matter what you do, it simply isn't accommodating

to people with glasses, long lashes, or both.

For an additional \$100, Oculus offers a version with 128GB of extra storage, on top of the usual 64GB. The company also sells a special carrying case for \$59, an Elite Strap for "enhanced comfort" (\$59), and other odds and ends. If you buy directly from Oculus, they recommend Anker's third-party charging dock as well as a pair of Logitech earphones made specifically for the Quest 2.

For \$199, the stock Quest 2 offers a charging cable and two motion controllers — each with three buttons, two triggers, and a thumbstick.

One step up from the Quest 2 is the top-of-the-line **Meta Quest Pro** for \$999 (or under \$900 on sale). The Pro is a mixed-reality headset with improved internals and increased pixels-per-eye on the screens alongside quantum dots and pass-through cameras for overlaying digital content with the real world.

Pros: Good-looking display; powerful internals; great value; rich content library.

Cons: Facebook integration; only three-hour battery life; limited adjustability.

2. Meta Quest 3

The Meta Quest 3 is a VR and mixed-reality headset that can do pass-through, full-color video and hand tracking for half the cost of the Quest Pro. There's no denying that the Meta Quest 2 is a great value, but if you want to upgrade, the Meta Quest 3 improves on it in pretty much every way.

Pulling the Quest 3 from its minimalist packaging reveals a thinner, slightly smaller headset with a redesigned Y-shaped strap and controllers that eschew the big plastic rings found on the previous generation. The headset also has a smidge more personality thanks to the three camera bubbles on the front. With only a slight increase in weight (515 grams versus 503 grams), the Quest 3 remained comfortable throughout our testing. Most people won't need to upgrade to the \$70 Elite Strap for day-to-day use.

The comfort and ergonomic improvements continue on the headset proper, where Meta has included a wheel to increase the interpupillary distance from 53mm to 75mm. Combined with the ability to move the facial interface (the part that connects the strap to the headset) forward and back, wearers won't have to take off their glasses or order pricey custom prescription inserts to play.

Resolution has been bumped up 30%, and the 110-degree field of view is 15% wider. The upgrades combine to create a smooth, lifelike experience when watching movies or TV shows in a big virtual theater or playing games on the Quest 3.

Native gaming has gotten a big bump thanks to the newer Snapdragon XR2 Gen 2 processor — putting the graphics on par with the Nintendo Switch — but the increase in visual fidelity is most obvious when connecting the headset to a PC. Text is legible and crisp, and using the Quest 3 as a virtual workspace, with giant monitor windows floating overhead, was genuinely impressive.

Meta touts the Quest 3 as the first "true" headset for mixed reality, and in that regard, they're not wrong. The six full-color cameras do an admirable job of feeding video to the dual displays, allowing wearers to play mixed-reality games, orient themselves by toggling between mixed reality and VR, and map the room they want to play in.

Although the Quest 3 is one of the most technically impressive VR headsets on the market, it isn't perfect. There are the fit issues, and the battery life is the same as the Quest 2, topping out at one and a half to three hours depending on usage.

Pros: Improved specs and screens; comfortable and easy to fit out of the box; mixed reality is genuinely impressive.

Cons: Stock strap won't fit everyone; VR games can still be nauseating; weak battery life.

3. Valve Index VR Kit

We don't know if anything has ever wowed us right out of the box like the Valve Index. This is a big, expensive set of powerful VR gear, but it's also beautiful. The packaging, the design of the headset and all the smaller functional touches establish this as the frontrunner among high-end tethered headsets on our list.

It's an investment, but for this kind of low-nausea, high-performance experience, you're getting what you pay for. You can expect frames rates of 90 fps or higher, immersive audio, and at least four different main points of comfort adjustment.

It comes with wall-mountable base stations (for room-scale tracking), user-friendly documentation, and it has the best VR controllers we've tried to date. Each Index controller boasts 87 sensors for precision

gesture-based input, along with comfy fabric straps that hold them in place — especially convenient when you have a large head-mounted display blocking your vision. Speaking of which, this didn't feel as heavy and unwieldy as any of the other tethered headsets we've tested, which is a big win for long-term comfort.

If you intend to spend hours in VR playing performance-intensive games and don't need a standalone headset, you'll be quite pleased with the Valve Index and its massive software catalog, including Valve's "Half-Life: Alyx." Just make sure your PC has enough power to support it.

Pros: Excellent performance; comfortable and lightweight; precise controls.

Cons: You'll need a powerful PC to use it.



4. Sony PlayStation VR2

The PlayStation VR2 (aka the PSVR 2) delivers an impressive VR gaming experience. Its advanced specs and technology like high-quality motion tracking make it a console gamer's immersive dream — provided that dream involves being tethered by a wire to your PlayStation 5. This VR headset comes with no wireless connectivity. Even its integrated earbuds are connected by wire.

The PSVR 2 comes with two Sense motion controllers, which are both accurate and enjoyable to use for navigating through the games we tested the headset with. It's got two 2000 x 2040 HDR-capable OLED displays with a 120Hz refresh rate and uses foveated eye tracking to render specific areas (where your eyes are focusing) in great detail. During testing, the headset itself fit comfortably.

Sony has promised that a large library of games to use with the PSVR 2 is on its way. Unfortunately, if

you invested in the original PlayStation VR headset, you'll find that your existing VR games aren't backward compatible with the PSVR 2. That's disappointing, especially when you consider that, at the time we reviewed it, the headset was selling for \$550. Being able to play the VR titles that gamers already owned would take some of the sting out of that price — although launch titles like "Horizon Call of the Mountain" are still technical achievements in their own right.

Of course, now that Sony has finally announced full PC compatibility via the PlayStation VR2 Steam app, our opinion of the headset has greatly improved. Since it no longer requires a PlayStation 5 to use, the PSVR 2 might be the choice for gamers who only want a high-quality Steam VR device.

Pros: Comfortable to wear; accurate motion sensors and controls; wide library on the horizon.

Cons: Not wireless; not backward compatible; expensive.

5. HTC Vive Pro 2 Full Kit



HTC

Many VR enthusiasts have long considered the HTC Vive to be the gold standard, and the Vive Pro 2 more or less lives up to its reputation. It has a 120Hz refresh rate like the Index, it features immersive over-the-ear headphones, and it performs like a dream.

If you're worried about VR-induced nausea, the Vive Pro 2 is probably the best antidote we've found so far. If you're skeptical about the amount of time you're likely to spend in VR, or don't care about top-performing hardware, then the Pro 2 is probably too big an investment for you — but it's truly an impressive way to experience the medium. Pair it with a high-end gaming PC, and VR doesn't get any more convincing.

A few issues hold this one back. For one thing, setting it up involved a lengthy, frustrating gauntlet of update downloads and troubleshooting. It's also very heavy, with a lot of cables running to and from your head, the Link Box adapter, your PC and your power source — not to mention the cords from the two base stations.

The fantasy of the metaverse is still an imperfect one, but that doesn't mean you can't have some terrific fun with this undeniably powerful piece of hardware.

Pros: Powerful hardware; high refresh rate; includes over-the-ear headphones.

Cons: Very heavy; unwieldy cables.

Written by **Alex Kane, Edgar Ortiz** and **Jonathan Hilburg**, Reviewed

CONTENT CREATORS IN THE TECH SPACE

Lifestyle tech creators must be malleable, fluid, and seemingly growing in impact.

Exhibit A: CES is leaning into creators in '25.



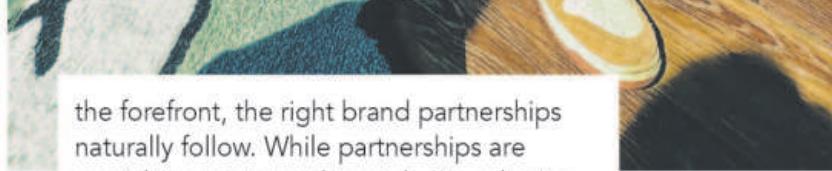
WHAT STARTED AS A HOBBY

—sharing tips and trends in an industry I love—quickly drew in a growing audience. It's hard to describe the shift that happens when a casual interest becomes something much bigger.

Many of my friends in the creator space, like Carter Smith (@CarterPCs), Ian Bellinger (@Tussalty), Andres Vidoza, and Nathan Espinoza, have also felt the rapid rise of digital media. Together, we're navigating the industry during an exciting, sometimes surreal, moment.

Balancing my audience's expectations with what's authentic to my personal brand has been one of my biggest challenges. For me, the viewers are the heartbeat of what I do. As long as I keep my audience at

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the forefront, the right brand partnerships naturally follow. While partnerships are crucial to sustaining this work, I'm selective, only choosing brands that align with my values and add something worthwhile to my audience's experience. Some of these great partners include Best Buy, Google, Microsoft, Spotify, T-Mobile, and DJI.

Of course, creating sponsored content that feels authentic takes a bit of finesse. It's not just about mentioning a brand; it's about weaving them naturally into my content in a way that resonates with viewers. My team at Rakugo Media helps me do just that—bringing in brands that enhance my vision while keeping it genuine. No one wants to sit through an ad that feels out of place, and the best partnerships understand that.

Creators today have undeniable influence. Look at Marques Brownlee's reviews on the Humane AI Pin and Fisker—his insights not only shape consumer perspectives,

but influence brands themselves. As I see it, creators in the "lifestyle tech" space are defining a new niche that will only grow. I look up to figures like Marques, who set the bar for thoughtful, honest reviews, and I hope to carry that forward.

The more genuine we can be about tech, the stronger our audience connection becomes. Brands are beginning to see that creators don't just sway consumers; we also shape product design and trends. Some of my favorite conversations with tech companies come from designers and engineers asking for honest feedback. They know we're in the early stages of a creator-driven marketplace, and they value our insight throughout the development process.

Above all, my goal is to deliver honest, engaging content that respects my audience's time and trust. Every review and recommendation is built around their experience, and I'm grateful to create for a community I truly value.



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FROM BigLaw TO BigTech

URBINATI IS A TECH CREATOR WITH 4.5+ MILLION FOLLOWERS AND 1+ BILLION VIEWS

—but he didn't start his career where you might expect.

Before he was breaking down the latest gadgets, Joe was navigating the dense world of patent law at a bustling New York City firm. With degrees in Computer Engineering and Law from Washington University in St. Louis, he joined the prestigious firm Baker Botts. Here he helped clients like Facebook, Columbia University, and Visa protect their hardware and software IP. But while he was drafting legal documents by day, he was dreaming of tech content by night, ready to swap court filings for unboxings and reviews.

TURNING A LUNCH BREAK HOBBY INTO A SOCIAL MEDIA FOLLOWING

By day, Joe moonlit tech content, which seemed unusual for an attorney who pushed court filings and patents applications. Hiding his lunch breaks, Joe produced his tech videos. Using his phone, a bit of ingenuity, and the green screen filter, he transformed into "Chillrogg," the casual yet informative tech reviewer. Initially, Joe filmed these videos in perhaps the least glamorous setting imaginable—the office bathroom.

LEAVING LAW BEHIND

Over time, Joe's audience grew, and he entered a crossroads: stay in the rigid path of patent law or dive into content creation. As his following quickly grew, Joe took the leap, sacrificing his attorney lifestyle for the chance to take on the creator economy as a lifestyle tech creator. Today, Joe commands a multi-million follower audience on social media. Today he laughs at his "bathroom grade" green-screen filtered content, reminding himself how quickly the industry

Joe "Chillrogg" Urbinati's Unlikely Journey

"It was the only place with enough privacy to film during the workday," he joked later. Behind the locked door of the office bathroom, Chillrogg shared his thoughts on the latest gadgets, software, and tech trends, all while balancing his day job in law.

This unlikely setup quickly resonated with viewers. Joe's unfiltered take on tech products delivered an approachable, conversational style that felt relatable to his audience. The contrast between his legal career and his tech reviews only added to his appeal, making him stand out as a creator who didn't fit the typical influencer mold.

accelerated into the next great industry. Joe coordinates amongst his editing and scripting team to produce professional-grade studios, where he introduces gadgets to his audience with life, color, style, and energy.

Joe never expected his audience to dictate how his content would transform. Joe no longer needs to incorporate his legal background as blatantly as before. In fact, the tech world calls Joe by Chillrogg a creator whose approach captures the excitement of tech without getting bogged down in specs. For him, it's about making tech feel immersive, exciting, and accessible.

A NEW CHAPTER IN TECH CONTENT

Joe "Chillrogg" Urbinati's story is an example of how the digital age welcomes opportunity regardless of background. His success is a testament to the power of doing what you love—even if you start out filming in a bathroom at work. For Joe, it's less about the destination and more about the journey, one tech review at a time.

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2024

Holiday Gift Guide

1



TILE MATE BLUETOOTH TRACKER (\$25)

Attach this little guy to your keys, tv remote, or glasses case, and let your phone find it for you. Perfect for dads who can never seem to find their wallet (not me).



2

3



AMAZON FIRE HD 8 TABLET (\$100)

This handy tablet is ideal for reading, streaming, or browsing recipes without the bulk of a computer. Convenient on-the-go entertainment without the sticker shock of other tablets.



4

JBL FLIP 6 BLUETOOTH SPEAKER (\$125)

This small but mighty speaker has great sound quality and is waterproof—no need to worry about an accidental spill. A great gift for a child or grandchild.

5



GOOGLE PIXEL 8A (\$499)

A cutting edge budget smartphone with a fantastic camera and a smooth screen. Perfect for those who want the flagship experience without the \$1,500 price tag.

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ANKER PORTABLE CHARGER POWERCORE 10000 (\$25)

No more worrying about a dead phone during a day out. This compact power bank is a lifesaver, giving you a quick charge on the go. Small, simple, and saves the day.



6

7



MICROSOFT SURFACE GO 4 (\$580)

A laptop and tablet in one, with enough power for emails, browsing, or streaming. It's a perfect gift for students or as a work device.

NINTENDO SWITCH LITE (\$199)

This handheld console is a fantastic holiday gift for teens or younger and with a reasonable price tag. The most popular games you could bundle with this are *The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom*, *Super Mario Odyssey*, and *Hades*.



8

9



NOTHING CMF SMART WATCH (\$69)

A budget-friendly smartwatch that tracks health and fitness basics. Perfect for monitoring steps or heart rate while keeping an eye on style. Simple, affordable, and a bit of tech flair for the wrist.

SKYTECH SHADOW GAMING PC (\$999)

A powerful budget gaming PC that can run any of the modern games.



10

REFUELING ZONE

Take your fitness journey to a new level with post-workout recovery tools at home

Celia San Miguel Special to USA TODAY

For years, grind culture permeated not only our professional lives, but also our collective approach to fitness, fueled by ubiquitous but misguided mantras such as “No days off” and “Pain is weakness leaving the body.” • Today, our attitudes have changed to reflect a more balanced approach to exercise that places as much emphasis on athletic recovery as it does on training.

“Athletic recovery is the period in between training sessions during which the body can repair itself and reduce inflammation, returning to (homeostasis),” says Jenny Liebl, a certified personal trainer and senior content developer for the International Sports Science Association, a fitness certification organization.

Muscle fibers endure microscopic tears during exercise that need to heal to build muscle mass and develop greater strength — a process that can take place only with adequate rest and recovery. During the recovery period, the body flushes out metabolic waste products accumulated during exercise that could lead to soreness. Finally, recovery involves refueling the body by replenishing depleted glycogen stores and fluids through hydration and proper nutrition.

Recovery helps facilitate relaxation and maintain focus; without proper recovery, fatigue can set in, leading to exhaustion, underperformance, irritability and frustration.

On the next page you’ll find technology to take your recovery to the next level.



Hyperice's Normatec 3 Legs offer seven levels of compression to boost blood flow in the lower body.
HYPERICE

TOOLS TO TRY

Fitness professionals agree that sleep, nutrition and hydration are the primary pillars of athletic recovery. But the right tools can aid the process. Once available only to elite athletes, these trainer-approved devices are now available to try in your home gym:

Compression

Legs feeling tight? Slip into a pair of air compression boots. They use pneumatic compression in a rhythmic pattern of inflation and deflation, squeezing and releasing different sections of the lower body to stimulate blood flow.

"They give your legs a massage, releasing and elongating any painful muscle knots, and offer compression, which loosens any lactic acid built up in your muscles and reduces inflammation," says Erin Beck, director of training for Stride Fitness.

The Hyperice Normatec 3 Legs (pictured on page 40) offer seven levels of compression. Renpho's Aeria Ultimate Thermal Leg Massager includes three intensity levels and a heat function.

- Hyperice Normatec 3 Legs, \$799, normatec.com.
- Renpho Aeria Ultimate Thermal Leg Massager, \$149.99, renpho.com.

Rolling

Available in different sizes and densities, foam rollers loosen tight connective tissue, or fascia, around your muscles and improve your range of motion and flexibility.

TriggerPoint's GRID rollers have grooves that act like a massage therapist's fingers. The TriggerPoint MB1 massage ball can be used to loosen plantar fascia.

- TriggerPoint GRID, \$22.99, tptherapy.com
- TriggerPoint MB1, \$17.99, tptherapy.com



The Ice Barrel 300. ICEBARREL.COM

Cold Immersion Therapy

The Edge Legacy Tub from Edge Theory Labs cools to 37 degrees Fahrenheit within five hours and features a state-of-the-art filtration and sanitation system. You can set the tub up (or take it down) in just 15 minutes.

The Ice Barrel 300 is a fully insulated, upright tub made of recycled plastic that can be filled with water and ice or paired with a chiller.

- Edge Theory Labs' The Edge Legacy Tub, \$3,990, edgetheorylabs.com.
- Ice Barrel 300, \$1,299.99, icebarrel.com.

Massage Guns

Using percussive pressure, massage guns target tight muscles and improve blood flow, promoting recovery. "Massage guns offer concentrated, intense, targeted massage. If there's a specific place where you're carrying tension, you can hone in on it," Beck says. "Within two minutes of using (my massage gun), I can get the same amount of muscle release that I'd get from 20 minutes of stretching."

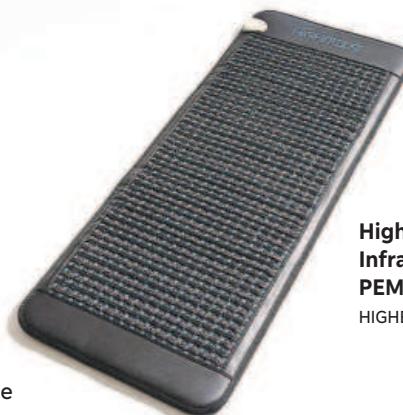
The Theragun Pro features an ergonomic grip and a quiet motor, so you can relax your muscles while watching TV.

- Theragun Pro, \$499, therabody.com



A member of the Washington Nationals baseball team loosens up with a Theragun Pro in the dugout at the team's ballpark in Washington, D.C., in 2023.

PATRICK SMITH/GETTY IMAGES



**HigherDOSE
Infrared
PEMF mat.**
HIGHERDOSE.COM

Infrared Heat

Heat therapies increase blood flow, facilitating the delivery of oxygen and nutrients necessary for muscle repair. These recovery devices emit infrared heat, delivering a soothing warmth while also dilating blood vessels and relieving muscle pain and stiffness.

The HigherDOSE Infrared PEMF mat combines infrared heat with pulsed electromagnetic field (PEMF) technology, which is said to help stimulate cellular repair and regeneration.

- HigherDOSE Infrared PEMF mat, \$1,374, higherdose.com.

Vibration Tools

"Vibration devices generally go deeper into tissue than percussion tools," Liebl says. "Percussion tools have a higher amplitude (the distance the shaft of the device moves in and out when making contact with the body), so it's akin to a hammer hitting a nail." The Rapid Release Therapy Pro3 vibration massager stands as the Aston Martin of vibration recovery tools, featuring five built-in treatment heads that vibrate at a frequency of 155 Hz.

Joey Levine, corrective exercise specialist and vice president of fitness at Bay Club Company in Walnut Creek, California, suggests picking up a vibrating massage ball to target hard-to-reach muscles. Levine recommends the TriggerPoint MB Vibe because it features three speeds.

- Rapid Release Therapy Pro3, \$999, recoveryforathletes.com.
- TriggerPoint MB Vibe, \$89, tptherapy.com.



The updated Apple Watch Series 10 is visually distinct from earlier series, though not wildly so. JUSTIN SULLIVAN/GETTY IMAGES

SMARTWATCH SHOWDOWN

New models from Apple, Samsung and Google jockey for position

Mike Feibus
Special to USA Today

With this year's smartwatch models, thin is in — and big is huge. • Unlike in previous years, the latest Apple Watch, Google Pixel Watch and Samsung Galaxy Watch models sport new looks, in their own ways. There are enticing new health-monitoring capabilities, too. • I don't need to tag the new Apple Watch with some offbeat wristband to tell it apart from last year's model. Pretty sure I've never said that before.

Bear in mind, the changes with the Apple Watch Series 10 (iOS, starting at \$399 for 42mm, \$529 for 46mm aluminum with LTE, as tested) aren't major. The Series 10 is just different enough that you can tell it apart at a glance from

the Series 7, Series 8 and Series 9, which are virtually indistinguishable from one another.

Of course, Apple isn't the only electronics maker to maintain a consistent style aesthetic year after year, even

when interior innovations serve up opportunities to spotlight the latest technology. With their bread-and-butter watches, Google and Samsung arguably changed the look and feel of their watches this year less than Apple.

At the same time, Google and Samsung both added new models this year. Google finally added a second, larger size with the Google Pixel Watch 3 (Android, starting at \$349.99 for 41mm, \$399.99 for 45mm and \$449.99 and \$499.99 as tested for 41mm/45mm with LTE), something a lot of us have wanted to see from the start.

In addition to the visually familiar Samsung Galaxy Watch 7 (Android, starting at \$299.99, \$329.99 as tested for 44mm Wi-Fi only), the electronics giant added the Galaxy Watch Ultra (Android, starting at \$649.99, as tested for 47mm titanium with LTE), an extra-large model for adventure enthusiasts akin to what Apple has been doing with its own Ultra-series.

I've been evaluating all five new devices — two each from Google and Samsung and one from Apple — more or less since they each came available. Which means I've had far more time with the Pixel and Galaxy watches than the Apple Watch Series 10.

One caveat up front: It's not like the old days, when most watch apps supported both iOS and Android. The Google Pixel Watches work only with Android smartphones — and work better with Pixel phones. Likewise, Samsung Galaxy watches are compatible with Android, with more features available on Samsung Galaxy phones. The Apple Watch Series 10, like every previous version, works only on the iPhone. So if you're not willing to change smartphone platforms, then all of these watches aren't available to you.

That said, all three are very nice smartwatches. The Google Pixel Watch 3 feels a little more basic than the Apple and Samsung devices, which have far more attractive watch-face options along with more attention-grabbing notifications. But PW3 health features are accessed through the familiar Fitbit app, which is a plus. (Google bought Fitbit in January 2021.)

Features

At 2000 nit peak brightness, they're all plenty bright to see in the sun. The Galaxy Watch Ultra boasts peak brightness of 3000 nits, just like the Apple Watch Ultra 2, which came out last year.

None have great battery life, though the PW3 is noticeably better than previous generations. The beefy Galaxy Watch Ultra has a much bigger battery and lasts one and a half to two times longer than the others, with power-saving modes to stretch up to 100 hours between charges.

All three include full-featured health monitoring. They monitor sleep, test ECG and track workouts. The Apple and Samsung watches both added sleep apnea detection this year, something Pixel Watch 3 doesn't have. Google and Samsung both report blood oxygen levels. Apple Watches are capable, but due to litigation, no models sold after December 31, 2023, offer the feature.

Apple Watch Series 10

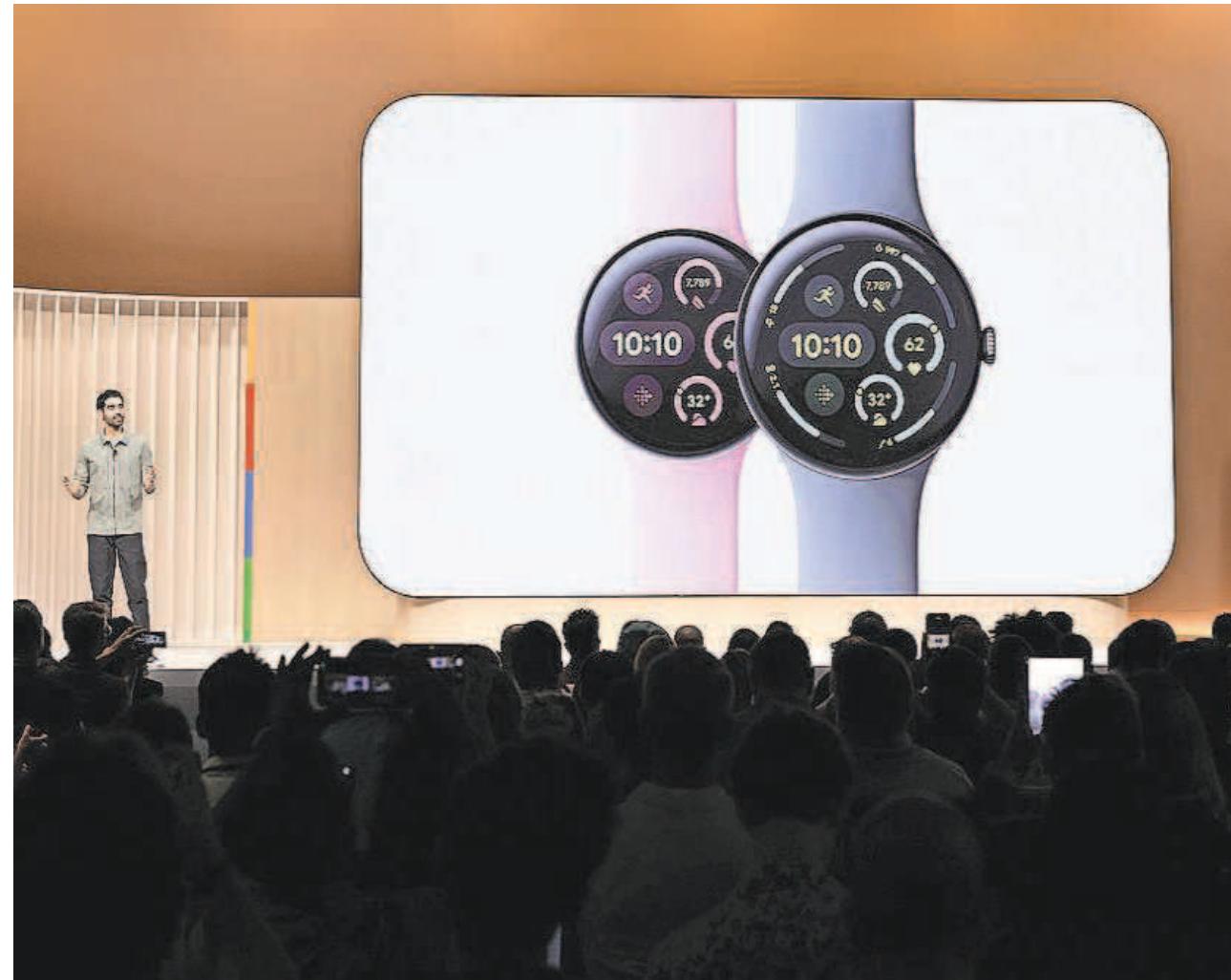
The Apple Watch Series 10 is a little bigger, a little lighter and a little thinner than the Series 9. If you're keeping score at home, the digital crown control on the side is also a bit smaller. And thanks to new display technology, the always-on watch display is brighter from the side. So it's easier to just glance down at the time.

Google Pixel Watch 3

The Pixel Watch 3's always-on display is easier to see in daylight than last year's. And the larger 45mm watch actually looks like it belongs on my wide wrist. The Fitbit "body response" alert flashes whenever it detects stress or excitement. It fires up fast — almost too fast, like when I'm having an uncomfortable face-to-face conversation.

Samsung Galaxy Watch 7 and Galaxy Watch Ultra

Both the Galaxy Watch 7 and the Galaxy Watch Ultra sport an updated biometric sensor complex that's a lot more



Project manager Sandeep Waraich announces the new Google Pixel Watch 3 in August 2024. JUSTIN SULLIVAN/GETTY IMAGES



Samsung's Galaxy Watch Ultra.

ADAM BERRY/GETTY IMAGES

accurate, but that's not all. The new sensor, called the BioActive sensor, also includes new colored LEDs that help it identify longer-term blood sugar trends in the body, similar to what the alc blood test reveals. Rather than test the blood, it monitors the skin for sugar byproducts, called advanced glycation end products, or AGEs. From what I know about my own alc results, the AGE Index provides a reasonable estimation. The Galaxy Watch Ultra does have some cool new features to attract divers, hikers and other outdoor enthusiasts. But there's plenty in this premium to appeal to less adventurous lifestyles as well.

So, is it time for a new watch?

If you've recently purchased a watch, there's probably not enough new here to entice an upgrade. Two exceptions: If you're a big-wristed Pixel Watch fan who still can't get used to the smaller

model, or if you're a Samsung Galaxy Watch fan and don't mind spending the extra cash, the Galaxy Watch Ultra is the first true premium-class model that lasts longer and offers new sportsman features the mainstream watches don't.

If, on the other hand, you're looking for your first smartwatch, then this is as good a time as any to buy. These are the best watches each company has turned out in a market that's already stabilized. So you'll get a great watch that should last you for years.

But don't forget: Before you pick a watch, decide whether you love your smartphone. Because that will go a long way toward helping you choose the right smartwatch.

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Amazon Prime just added a 10-cent discount on gasoline; here's how to get the deal

The newest perk for Amazon Prime members comes at the pump: 10 cents off every gallon of gas.

Prime members can get the discount, effective immediately, at about 7,000 BP, Amoco and AM/PM gas stations across the U.S. You get the discount by using Earnify, a loyalty program for BP-owned gas stations and convenience stores.

The gas discount is the most recent perk added to Amazon Prime, which costs \$14.99 per month or \$139 annually. That membership includes free deliveries (some the same day), Amazon Prime Video, Amazon Music, Amazon Photos and discounts at Whole Foods and GrubHub+.

Feedback from Amazon Prime members led to the addition of the gas discount, Amazon Prime vice president Jamil Ghani told USA TODAY. "We always look at where we can be of value to members, and every time we ask ... what would make Prime even more valuable for them, it's fuel savings," he said.

The average Prime member could save about \$70 a year with the discount, Ghani said. Next year, Amazon plans to add an electric vehicle charging discount at BP Pulse, the company's EV charging business.

Amazon Prime members will find this gas savings deal "a very valuable addition," said Neil Saunders, managing director of retail data and analytics company Globaldata. "Gas is something the vast majority of Americans purchase, so a 10-cent saving is a significant benefit."

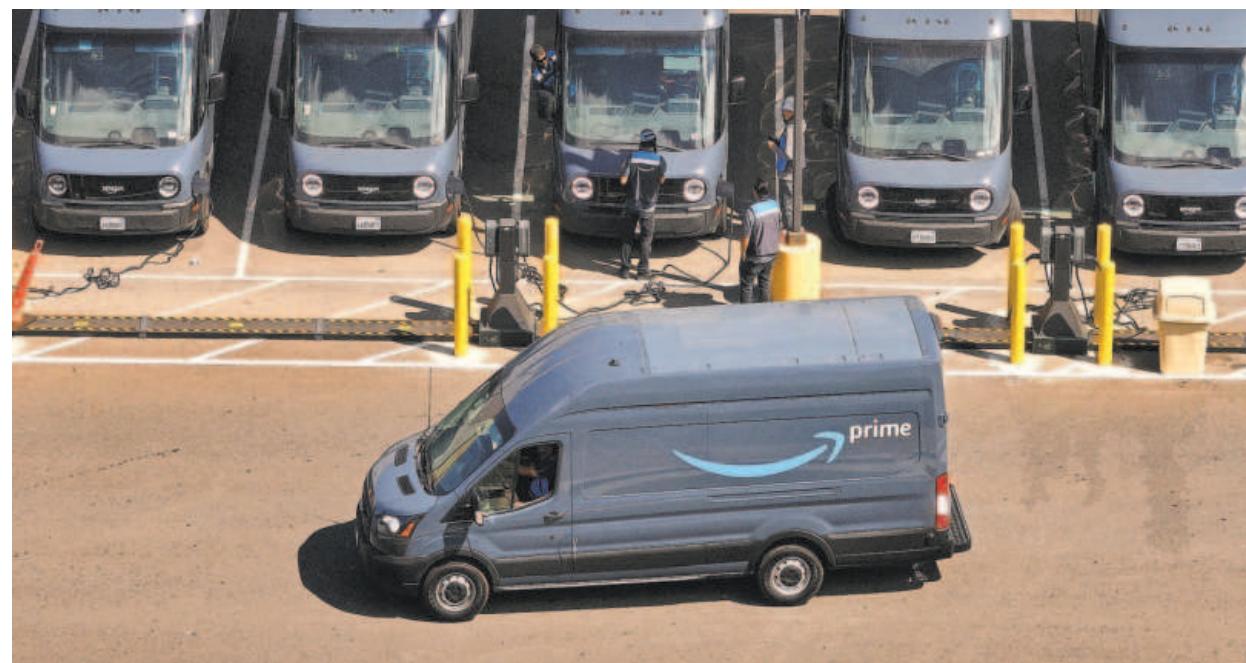
According to AAA, the average price of regular gas in the U.S. in late October was \$3.13 a gallon, so a 10-cent discount equates to about 3.2%. For premium, the average was \$3.94, making 10 cents a 2.5% discount.

Amazon Prime, which currently has more than 200 million members worldwide, offers more than 300 million items with free shipping in the U.S. That's about 20 times the selection that was available for free shipping when the Prime service launched in 2005, Ghani said.

In that time, many competitors — including Walmart, Target and Costco — have launched and expanded their own delivery options.

— Mike Snider, USA TODAY

Amazon: Same-day prescription delivery will be available to nearly half of U.S. by end of 2025



An Amazon delivery truck leaves a distribution center in California. The online retailer launched its Amazon Pharmacy business in 2020. It's opening pharmacies for same-day delivery in 20 more cities next year. JUSTIN SULLIVAN/GETTY IMAGES

Amazon will expand its national pharmacy network next year, which the company said would allow it to reach nearly half of U.S. residents for same-day delivery of prescriptions.

The expansion by the Seattle-based retailer comes as national pharmacy chains such as Walgreens, CVS and Rite Aid have been shuttering stores and closing pharmacies.

"Amazon is leveraging its vast logistics network and advanced automa-

tion technology to solve one of pharmacy's biggest pain points: the lack of convenient, affordable access to medications," an Amazon statement said.

Amazon will be adding 20 pharmacies to its existing network in 2025, which will allow more customers to get their needed medications more quickly, John Love, vice president of Amazon Pharmacy told USA TODAY.

"We've kind of been beating on the drum of U.S. health care needs to be

better at saving people time and money," he said. "Access is hard. Getting access to care is hard. Affording care is hard."

By the end of 2025, nearly half (45%) of U.S. Amazon customers are expected to be eligible for same-day delivery of prescription medications. In most cases, that means a customer could order medication by 4 p.m. and receive it at home by 10 p.m.

— Betty Lin-Fisher, USA TODAY

Best Buy expects bigger profit from cost controls even as consumer spending remains cool

Best Buy raised its annual profit forecast in August as tighter controls on costs helped the electronics retailer more than offset the impact from steeper discounts and promotions.

Best Buy's share price rose 15% after it also reported a smaller-than-expected drop in second-quarter comparable sales and breezed past earnings estimates.

The retailer refreshed its membership program last year and trimmed jobs as part of a restructuring plan, in a bid to help margins amid softer demand at its stores as shoppers deferred spending on pricier electronics.

"We see a consumer who is seeking value and sales events, and one who is

also willing to spend on high-price-point products when they need to, or when there is new compelling technology," CEO Corie Barry said.

The company said it expects adjusted earnings per share for fiscal year 2025 to be between \$6.10 and \$6.35, compared with its previous forecast of \$5.75 to \$6.20.

While overall demand remains soft, shoppers in the United States were looking to upgrade their laptops and tablets during the summer after holding back for several quarters.

Best Buy also benefited from demand for higher-priced artificial intelligence-powered products such as Microsoft's Copilot+ PCs.

"Back-to-school is right on pace with how we expected it and that includes the fact that we still think we have some decent volume in front of us," Barry said on a media call.

"While we are encouraged by Best Buy's improved second-quarter top-line performance, demand remains choppy, and consumers are buying on need and value. This is a consistent theme we have seen in retail earnings in Q2," said M Science analyst John Tomlinson.

Best Buy's second-quarter comparable sales fell 2.3% versus expectations of a larger 3.2% drop, according to LSEG data.

— Reuters

On deck from Walmart: Fewer receipt checks at Sam's Club, but more drone deliveries

Shopping at Walmart and Sam's Club will be getting easier thanks to new technology.

Walmart is rolling out initiatives to improve the customer experience, from AI-powered search tools to technology that will do away with long receipt check lines at Sam's Club.

"We build technology to serve people and not the other way around," said Doug McMillon, Walmart's president and CEO.

- New AI technology at Sam's Club is designed to replace receipt-check stations at the exit, where an employee scans the customer's receipt and then checks it against items in their cart.

The retailer has launched a pilot program using computer vision technology and AI to scan the customer's cart as they approach the exit. The system examines the cart's contents and compares them to what the customer paid for, either in the checkout lanes or via the retailer's "Scan and Go" app. Sam's Club plans to expand to its nearly 600 stores by the end of the year.

"At Sam's Club, we care about every second a member spends with us. So eliminating even the few seconds it

takes to scan a receipt at the exit door is well worth it," said Megan Crozier, the chief merchant at Sam's Club.

- After more than 20,000 drone deliveries over the past two years, Walmart is expanding drone service to 1.8 million additional households in the Dallas-Fort Worth area. The company said this is the first time a U.S. retailer has offered drone delivery to this many households in a single market.

"Drone delivery is not just a concept of the future. It's happening now and will soon be a reality for millions of additional Texans," said Prathibha Rajashekhar, senior vice president of innovation and automation for Walmart U.S. New drone delivery hubs are expected to launch in the coming months, with the expansion complete by the end of the year. Walmart also offers drone deliveries in Arizona, Arkansas, Florida, Utah and Virginia.

- Walmart also said a new search experience powered by generative AI is now available on iOS and will soon be available on other platforms.

The function allows customers to search for items by offering contextual cues. If a customer is throwing a Super

Bowl party, for instance, they could search "football watch party" to find relevant items instead of typing in multiple searches for things like chips, chicken wings and soda. Walmart says the search tool will account for "a variety of other factors" like location and search history to yield better results.

Walmart also said it is working on a new augmented reality experience called Shop with Friends.

The social commerce platform will let customers create virtual outfits to share with their friends for feedback. The outfits will be displayed on a virtual model with a size and shape similar to the customer.

CEO McMillon acknowledged that some of Walmart's innovations will shift employee roles.

"No doubt some tasks will go away and some roles will change. And some of them should, like the ones that involve lifting heavy weight or doing repetitive tasks," he said. "As that's happening, we're designing new roles that our associates tell us are more enjoyable and satisfying and also often result in higher pay."

— USA TODAY NETWORK



Walmart is expanding drone delivery in Texas. It also offers it in Arizona, Arkansas, Florida, Utah and Virginia. WALMART

Target is cutting prices on 2,000+ items to help you save this holiday season

Buying holiday gifts for all your loved ones is expensive, but it might not sting quite so much this year when you shop at Target.

That's due to Target's new promotional campaign to reduce prices on more than 2,000 items this holiday season. Target already offers pretty competitive pricing, and customers will now be able to enjoy even more savings. The price-reduction campaign includes items across all categories, including groceries, household essentials, kitchen appliances, holiday decor and more.

That means you can save on everything you need to get you through the holidays season — think price cuts on toilet paper, Thanksgiving essentials, wrapping paper, Christmas lights and much more.

The price reductions took effect Oct. 22 and came on top of the 8,000 items for which Target had already lowered prices this year. By the end of the holiday shopping season, then, the mega retailer will have reduced prices on more than 10,000 popular products.

You don't need a Target Circle membership to shop Target holiday deals, but having one can help you access special member-only deals and let you shop select sales before the general public. You can also earn points and shopping benefits with Target Circle. Best of all, signing up for a standard Target Circle membership is free.

The Target Black Friday sale will likely start in late November. With the holiday shopping season already in full swing, we expect to see early Target Black Friday deals several weeks ahead of Black Friday proper, which is the Day after Thanksgiving, or Friday, Nov. 29.

— Elsie Boskamp, USA TODAY



Tech Talk
Kim Komando

Using the right prompt
in tools like ChatGPT
can ease mental load

SAVE TIME AND STRESS: LET AI DO IT

ChatGPT has changed my life – and maybe yours, too, even if you don't use it as much as I do. • You've probably noticed the artificial intelligence tools that have been added to Meta apps like Facebook and Instagram. It won't be long before all your most-used apps and services integrate chatbots. (Yes, I'm sure the folks at Google are quaking in their search boots.) • Don't wait to get comfortable with AI. Try out a few of these prompts to make daily life a little less taxing. You'll see just how easy they are to use.



GETTY IMAGES

Saving time

I recently uploaded to ChatGPT a commercial building's rent roll, profit and loss statement, and comps for its area. I then asked ChatGPT to analyze the data and see whether the building would be a good investment.

Sure, I know how to do that math myself, but it would have taken 30 minutes. No joke: It took me longer to upload the documents than it did for ChatGPT to come up with its answers — about 30 seconds.

The best part is that it laid out its calculations and reasonings, so I could analyze them myself and double-check its work. If you don't get that with your answer, you can always ask follow-ups like, "How did you make that decision?" or "Tell me how you got that answer."

Making a decision when you can't

There's a term for this: decision fatigue. Sometimes, you've had to make so many decisions in one week that you just can't do it again. So you could try something along these lines:

- "I'm having three friends over for dinner tomorrow. One is a vegetarian, and one is allergic to peanuts. What should I make for dinner?"
- "My mother-in-law is asking for my help choosing a destination for a family vacation. Last year, we went to Rosemary Beach in Florida, and everyone complained the water was too warm. We live in Houston, and no one wants to fly more than five hours. Can you give me some options?"

Helping with complex tasks

Say you're a human resources manager and must create an employee guide from scratch. That's a heck of a lot of work, and you'd likely end up heading to a search engine to see where to begin. A chatbot can do that, too, and even create an outline for you.

But this bears emphasizing: Do not use an LLM chatbot to create legal documents or anything that really needs a lawyer or another professional's touch. But as a starting place? Absolutely.

Acting as an impartial third party

You're arguing with a friend, your spouse or a relative. Or maybe you're in a contentious situation with someone professionally. Before you text or type an angry reply, consult an AI party without emotion attached to the situation.



ChatGPT and other AI utilities can give you a head-start when analyzing data, composing communications, taking care of mundane tasks (as well as complex ones) and more. GETTY IMAGES

Here's a prompt idea: "My roommate and I are arguing because she keeps leaving her dirty dishes in the sink for days, even though they're attracting bugs. How can I respectfully make the point that I need her to stop this?"

Analyzing information

This is an AI sweet spot. The technology excels at finding patterns and point-

ing them out. A couple of examples:

- "Here's a 20-page legal document. Summarize the main points for me."
- "These are customer reviews. Break them into percentages by negative, neutral and positive." Like that, you have valuable data and don't have to spend time parsing it yourself.

Finding the right words

Say you're hiring a contractor to build a website for your small business. The problem is you don't "speak" web design and aren't sure where to begin. AI to the rescue. Find some sites you like — the ones that make you say, "Wow, I want one like this!"

Give those URLs to your favorite chatbot and ask it for a detailed description of their shared elements and overall design. This can help you communicate what you want more clearly.

Doing boring tasks for you

You're going on vacation. Use your last bit of willpower to finish the work you need to. AI can write your out-of-office email. Remember, the more detail and direction you give, the better.

"Write an out-of-office email" will give you bland (or totally unusable) results. Try something like: "Write an out-of-office email letting my contacts know I'll be back to work on Monday. I will have limited access to email and will respond by next Wednesday."

You'll get something more polished, professional and conversational than you'd have whipped up on your own.

Brainstorming

Let's go back to the vacation example. Your trip is in two weeks, and you have no clue what to do with the kids in the city you're visiting. Before you make the rounds of travel blogs, try a chatbot.

"I'm going on vacation to San Diego with my husband and 11-year-old twins. What are some fun, interesting things I can take everyone to do? I'd like a mix of free and affordable activities. My kids are picky eaters and really enjoy being outside."

Learn about the latest technology on the Kim Komando Show, the nation's largest weekend radio talk show. Kim takes calls and dispenses advice on today's digital lifestyle, from smartphones and tablets to online privacy and data hacks. For her daily tips, free newsletters and more, visit her website.

WE KNOW OUR DATA ISN'T SAFE

Survey shows just how little Americans trust business with their personal info

Mehdi Punjwani and Sierra Campbell Blueprint

The landscape of data security and privacy is constantly changing. A 2023 survey by the research firm Gartner, for example, found that almost half of organizations with more than 10 marketing channels were increasing the amount of customer data they collect. Meanwhile, 60% of marketing leaders predicted that it would become more challenging to collect such data with an appropriate balance of customer value and privacy. • So it's vital that consumers understand the importance of protecting their personal information.

USA TODAY Blueprint conducted a survey to examine Americans' privacy concerns and the actions they're taking as a result of them.

In the study, conducted in spring 2024, 84% of American respondents said they were either somewhat concerned or very concerned about the security and privacy of their personal data online, as well as about the amount of personal data businesses are collecting.

Further, 79% of Americans said they were somewhat or very concerned about the way businesses are using their personal data. And given the recent cultural focus on artificial intelligence technology and its prevalence in everyday life, it's perhaps no wonder that three-quarters of survey respondents said they were somewhat or very concerned about the increasing use of AI in businesses.

Driving these concerns is a lack of knowledge about what businesses actually do with the personal data they collect. Only around a quarter (26%) of Americans said they feel they understand very well and know the full details about how their data is used by businesses; slightly more (27%) reported having little or no understanding at all.



GETTY IMAGES

Keeping kids safe

Four in five Americans (80%) said they were somewhat or very concerned about businesses collecting data to target children with personalized ads. More than half of respondents (53%) said they were “very” concerned about this. That was a higher “very concerned” figure than for any other factor, showing how highly Americans value data privacy, particularly for their children.

Gaming was of particular concern for parents. With the popularity of online video games unlikely to decline anytime soon, this constant connection is giving parents cause to worry. Some 77% were concerned that games are tracking their children’s online activities.

Government seen as falling short

Americans do not think the U.S. government is doing enough to address concerns around data security and privacy. Almost four in five (79%) said they are concerned about the lack of punishment for brands violating privacy laws.

Most respondents to the survey also said the government is failing to enforce existing privacy laws (76%), while 74% said the government is not effective in protecting personal data with privacy laws or safeguarding children’s online privacy and safety.

More than 60% of our respondents said that the government is failing to punish brands that violate privacy laws, enforce existing privacy laws, protect children’s online privacy and safety, and protect personal data with privacy laws and regulations.

Mistrust of businesses’ practices

Almost a third of Americans distrust how businesses use their personal data: 32% don’t trust businesses to use data ethically, or to do so in only the ways originally intended and agreed upon.

Even more (37%) don’t trust that businesses will not share their personal data without their permission. And a large majority (69%) said they’d be likely to shop elsewhere if they disagreed with a business’ data privacy terms. This only serves to highlight the growing importance of businesses re-establish trust with their consumers.

A significant stumbling block for businesses is transparency about the process of data collection, rather than the collection of data itself.

For example, majorities of Americans



About four in five Americans said they are concerned about the lack of punishment for brands that violate privacy laws. PIXDELUXE/GETTY IMAGES

Keep your data safe

What can Americans do to improve their data security and protect their personal information? You can’t eliminate risk entirely, but here are some steps to reduce it:

- **Use a password manager** to store passwords securely and generate unique passwords for different accounts.
- **Don’t use public Wi-Fi when handling money or sensitive data**, as these networks can be vulnerable to cybercriminals.
- **Keep your software up to date** to ensure it has the latest protection from online threats.
- **Limit data sharing with** third parties and opt out when possible.
- **Read privacy policies carefully** so you’re aware of what you’re signing up for on websites and in apps.
- **Consider using a VPN** to encrypt your internet connection and protect your online activity from being monitored.

said they would be more willing to share their data if:

- Businesses were more upfront about how it would be used (60%).
- They had a clearer understanding of the benefits of sharing data (63%).
- Artificial intelligence wasn’t involved in the process at all (53%).

In the survey, 42% of respondents said they would be more likely to share their data with brands if those brands advocated for and practiced data privacy. By comparison, only a quarter of respondents said they’d be more likely to share data in order to improve AI prod-

ucts and services. A mere 17% said they would be more likely to share data to receive personalized ads and offers.

What does this mean for businesses? In the current landscape, it’s clear that they need to make changes to gain more consumer trust. Data collection can be vital for brands, and Americans would like to see these businesses enhance data security and protection measures more than anything else (52%).

Among other changes Americans would like to see in terms of data privacy and security are:

- More control over what data is col-

lected and how it’s used (48%).

- Increased transparency about how the data is used (44%).
- Clearer communication about their rights concerning their data (40%).

What steps can businesses take to bolster consumer trust? They include:

- **Investing more in cybersecurity measures and technologies** such as encryption and firewalls, and keeping systems up to date to ensure they’re protected against new threats.
- **Giving users more control over data collection and use**, with options to view data and request its deletion.
- **Providing more transparency and communication about data usage and rights** for customers.
- **Developing a detailed and thorough response plan for data breaches** and ensuring all staff are adequately trained on these procedures.
- **Consulting external security experts for audits and assessments** regularly to identify vulnerabilities and recommend improvements.

Bust for biggest brands

More than a quarter of Americans said they don’t trust the biggest brands in the U.S. with their personal data.

Among major brands, the most trusted was Amazon, with almost half of all respondents (49%) viewing it as trustworthy. It was ahead of Google (35%), Apple (31%) and Walmart (25%).

The brands consumers trusted least included Tesla (4%), Snapchat (7%) and Starbucks (8%).

Predictably, there were generational splits across businesses — particularly with social media, as each generation seemed to have its preferred platform. Millennials trusted Facebook the most of any platform, with almost a third (32%) saying so, compared with 19% for Instagram and 14% for TikTok.

Conversely, Gen Z preferred Instagram (28%) to Facebook (23%) in terms of trust with data, with TikTok at 22%. Among baby boomer respondents, 14% trusted Facebook, 4% trusted Instagram and 2% trusted TikTok.

Weak trust across industries

On the topic of social media, as the previous figures suggest, Americans don’t particularly trust this industry with data. Some 37% of respondents said they think social media platforms





use their data unethically, a significantly higher percentage than for computer and technology businesses (25%), the entertainment industry (24%), and media and news (24%).

And 28% of respondents said they don't trust any of the industries listed in the survey, including health care, retail and e-commerce, security, food and beverage, hospitality and real estate, among others.

Of interest is how Americans working in particular sectors feel about their own industries' use of personal data. Insider knowledge in the computer and technology industry may be the most revealing: Almost half (47%) said that their own industry acts unethically with personal data.

AI in data collection

With artificial intelligence rapidly ascending and chatbots like ChatGPT taking the spotlight, almost four in five Americans (79%) said the U.S. government is not effectively regulating how businesses use AI or restricting potentially harmful AI development.

Additionally, around a third of Americans said they don't trust businesses to make responsible decisions about AI, with 14% feeling very distrustful of this particular aspect.

It's the responsibility of businesses to ensure they act within boundaries and ethics, especially where AI and data collection is concerned. Among steps companies can take to use artificial intelligence ethically:

- **Establishing ethical guidelines** before getting started so they can create a framework for actions going forward.

- **Being transparent with users** about the implementation of AI to ensure they can maintain trust.

- **Obtaining explicit informed consent** before using AI to collect data from users, allowing them to opt in, opt out or withdraw consent.

- **Regularly updating and auditing all AI systems** to ensure they're following guidelines and to help identify any potential issues.

Victims of cybercrime

Why is data security and privacy such a concern for Americans? Perhaps because the majority of respondents (70%) said they have been a victim of some kind of cybercrime. That's enough



Older Americans are more likely to take greater care in protecting themselves and their data online, the survey found. DELMAINE DONSON/GETTY IMAGES

Generational divide

Baby boomers, according to our survey results, do more to protect their personal data than any other age group, with:

- 47% denying tracking permissions on mobile apps.
- 56% regularly checking financial statements.
- 47% avoiding using public Wi-Fi for transactions or accessing sensitive information.

Generation Z are the least likely to check their privacy settings (21%), review and manage app permissions (20%) and turn off location tracking on mobile devices (25%). This may reflect a greater trust in technology on the part of younger generations compared with their older counterparts.

to make anyone think twice about what their personal data is being used for whenever entering, say, a phone number or email address online.

The survey found that 42% of Americans have experienced fraudulent charges on their credit card, while more than a third (35%) have had their social media accounts hacked. More than a quarter (28%) have had one or more passwords leaked in a data breach.

The data also suggests that different generations are susceptible to different threats. Half of all baby boomer respondents have experienced fraudulent credit card charges, while 44% of Millennials have had their social media accounts hacked. The most common instance of fraud for each age group was social media accounts being hacked.

What steps to take?

Just as businesses have a responsibility to safeguard users' information, consumers need to ensure that they are following best practices and keeping their own data safe.

One way to better understand what personal data you are handing over to a company — and what that company is going to do with it — is to read the company's terms and conditions.

But more than nine in 10 Americans (91%) said they have agreed to terms and conditions at least some of the time without reading them. More concerning, 19% of respondents said they do this all the time, while 27% do so often. This was more prevalent with Gen Z than any other age group, with 31% say-

ing they agree to terms and conditions without reading them all the time and 35% doing so often.

It's also important to practice good habits concerning passwords. Use different passwords for different accounts rather than put all your eggs in one basket, so to speak. More Americans use different passwords for different accounts than any other option. However, an alarmingly high one-fifth of respondents (20%) said they use the same password for most or all accounts.

Despite their reputation as being more technology aware, Gen Z (29%) and Millennials (30%) were most likely to use the same password for most or all accounts. Only 11% of baby boomers said they do this, and only 6% of the Silent Generation (those born 1925-45).

Another counterintuitive data point revealed by the survey was that almost a third (32%) of those working in the computer and technology sector use the same password for most or all of their accounts. That was second only to real estate workers (35%). A quarter of respondents working in the health care sector do this as well.

On the whole, there are a number of ways users and consumers can protect their data. The most commonly undertaken best practices include:

- Regularly checking financial statements and online accounts for unauthorized activity (41%).
- Using two-factor authentication (38%).
- Denying tracking permissions for mobile apps (37%).

Just over a fifth of all respondents said they regularly review and manage their app permissions on devices (21%) or use private browsing or incognito mode (21%). Less than a fifth (19%) take the extra step of using a VPN to ensure data privacy. Additionally, 8% of Americans take none of these steps.

This online survey was commissioned by USA TODAY Blueprint and conducted by market research company Talker Research. It was conducted among 2,000 naturally representative American adults from May 28 to June 4, 2024. The survey collected information on respondents' age, gender, location, industry and political party.

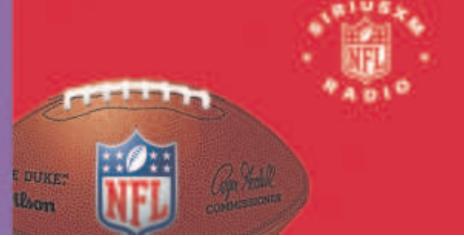
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New Car, Used Car, Truck/OEM, Marine, RV, or UTV

• Ad-free music curated by experts and DJs in every genre and decade

• Artist stations inspired by singers and bands you like

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A BANNER YEAR FOR BREACHES

With hackers on the prowl,
it's essential to protect yourself

From big banks to car dealerships, 2024 has been a banner year for data breaches. Here are some companies that may have exposed your data:



Tech Talk
Kim Komando

National Public Data breach: 2.9 billion records exposed

It's hard to imagine a hack much worse than one at a background-check company, whose entire job is to dig up nonpublic data. A lawsuit claims that negligence by National Public Data exposed 2.9 billion records on 170 million people. The details include Social Security numbers, full names and addresses. Hacking group ASDoD put the information up for sale for \$3.5 million. No word yet on any ransom payment.

Through a process called scraping, National Public Data collects and stores personal data from "nonpublic sources" to perform background checks. In other words, it gathers information that wasn't willingly (or knowingly) handed over.

Depending on what happens in court, National Public Data could be required to purge the personal data of affected individuals and to encrypt all collected data going forward.

Ascension ransomware attack: Hospital servers compromised

In May, an employee at one of the country's biggest hospital systems unwittingly downloaded malware. What ensued was a cyberattack avalanche.

Ascension runs 140 hospitals in 19 states and Washington, D.C. On May 8, the company detected unusual activity within its network. The disruption quickly became so bad that Ascension had to shut down emergency rooms and reroute patients.

Hackers got access to files on seven of Ascension's 25,000 servers; exactly whose data was affected is still under investigation. Ascension recently said that around 500 individuals were affected, but I'm willing to bet the final number will be a lot higher.

CDK global attack: Up to 15,000 car dealerships

One of the biggest companies providing software for car dealerships got hit with a double whammy in June. CDK, used by 15,000 dealerships for payroll and finance tasks, shut down its sys-

Other breaches

- **Advance Auto Parts (July):** Personal information of more than 2.3 million individuals was stolen.
- **Roku (April):** Through "credential stuffing" — that is, using login info leaked in other breaches — hackers accessed around 591,000 accounts. No financial info was accessed.
- **Truist Bank (June):** Hacking group Sp1d3r stole information on about 65,000 employees and posted it for sale online.
- **Tile (June):** Life360, the company behind Tile tracker devices, reported a breach that included names, addresses, email addresses, phone numbers and device identification numbers.
- **Ticketmaster (June):** This one affected 560 million accounts; data included names, addresses, phone numbers, email addresses, order history and partial payment info.
- **Dropbox (May):** Attackers accessed Dropbox Sign's development environment, compromising customer information.
- **TeamViewer (July):** Employee directory data, including names and encrypted passwords, was exposed.



LOCKING DOWN YOUR INFO

You can't stop hackers from hitting major companies, but you can protect yourself from fallout when they do.

Double-check all health care communications. If you receive an explanation of benefits (aka an EOB) from your insurer or a bill for services you didn't receive, contact your health care provider and insurance company ASAP. It could mean someone is using your benefits for their own health care.

Treat email requests with caution. Be skeptical of anything that seems super urgent. It's OK to slow down for safety. My rule of thumb: If it's a strange written request, like a text or email, I make a phone call.

Be wary of "old friends" who appear out of nowhere. It could be a hacker who happens to have a little (stolen) info. Take time to confirm they are who they say they are.

Make a list of data that may have been exposed when you hear of a breach. Keep this digitally or just on a sticky note. Be suspicious of anyone who references such data in an email or phone call. For example, say a company you financed your car through was hacked. Alarm bells should sound if you get a call out of the blue saying that there's a major problem with your loan.

Update your PIN and banking login credentials. Keep an eye on your bank and credit card statements for anything out of the ordinary. Set up banking alerts on your phone while you're at it.

Freeze your credit. This will keep scammers from opening a credit card or loan in your name. As with setting up a fraud alert, you'll need to contact each of the three credit bureaus.



tems after back-to-back cyberattacks on June 18 and 19. Rumor has it that the ransom payment was worth tens of millions of dollars.

The shutdown seriously disrupted dealership operations and sales. One Lexus dealership in New Jersey reported new car sales down 50% in June.

Change Healthcare attacked

Change Healthcare, a technology platform owned by UnitedHealth, is used by thousands of pharmacies, hospitals and health care facilities to receive payments and process claims.

One attack discovered in late February caused massive disruptions for weeks throughout the U.S. health care system. UnitedHealth paid a whopping \$22 million ransom to a Russian cybercriminal group, Black-Cat, to stop it from sharing the data it stole.

Then another gang of crooks, RansomHub, claimed that it stole data, too. In April, UnitedHealth said a "substantial proportion" of Americans' data was exposed. Estimates say as much as a third of all Americans were affected. The data includes sensitive medical data, including test results, diagnoses and images.

AT&T breach: Nearly all customers

In July, AT&T disclosed that hackers stole data from "nearly all" current and former customers after accessing a workspace on a third-party cloud platform. That data included phone call and text message records from May 1, 2022, to Oct. 31, 2022, as well as on Jan. 2, 2023. The company reportedly paid hackers a \$370,000 ransom to delete the information, though AT&T has not confirmed that.



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Create music tracks

Not everyone is musically inclined, but AI makes it pretty easy to pretend you are. At the very least, you can make a funny tune for a loved one who needs some cheering up.

AI to try: Udio.

Perfect for:

Experimenting with song styles.

Sample prompt:

"Heartbreak at the movie theater, '80s ballad."

Just give Udio a topic for a song and a genre, and it'll do the rest. I asked it to write a "yacht rock" song about a guy who loves sunsets, and it came up with two one-minute clips that were surprisingly good. You can customize the lyrics, too.

Produce quick video clips

The built-in software on our phones does a decent job at editing down the videos we shoot (like you and the family at the beach), but have you ever wished you could make something a little snazzier?

AI to try: Invideo.

Perfect for: Quick content creation.

Sample prompt: "Cats on a train."

Head to Invideo to produce your own videos, no experience needed. Your text prompts can be simple, but you'll get better results if you include more detail.

You can add an AI narration over the top (David Attenborough's AI voice is just too good). FYI, the free account puts a watermark on your videos, but if you're just doing it for fun, no biggie.



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Draft digital artwork

You don't need to be an AI whiz skilled at a paid program like Midjourney to make digital art. Here's an option anyone can try.

AI to try: OpenArt.

Perfect for: Illustrations and animations.

Sample prompt: "A lush meadow with blue skies."

OpenArt starts you off with a simple text prompt, but you can tweak it in all kinds of funky ways, from the image style to the output size. You can also upload your own images for the AI to take its cues from and even include pictures of yourself (or friends and family) in the art.

If you've caught the AI creative bug and want more of the same, try the OpenArt Sketch to Image generator. It turns your original drawings into full pieces of digital art.

More free AI fun

Maybe art and videos aren't your thing. There's still lots of fun to be had.

- Good time for kids and adults:** Google's "Quick, Draw!" Try to get the AI to recognize your scribblings before time runs out in this next-gen Pictionary-style game.

- Expose your kid to different languages:**

Another option from Google, Thing Translator, lets you snap a photo of something to hear the word for it in a different language. Neat!

- Warm up your vocal cords:**

Freddimeter uses AI to rate how well you can sing like Freddie Mercury. Options include "Don't Stop Me Now," "We Are the Champions," "Bohemian Rhapsody" and "Somebody To Love."

Kim Komando Special to USA TODAY

I'm not an artist. My brain just does *not* work that way. I tried to learn Photoshop but gave up. Now, I create fun images using artificial intelligence. • Some AI tech is kind of freaky, but many of the new AI tools out there are just plain fun. Let's jump into the wide world of free applications and platforms that will help you make something cool.



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